

THE PITFALLS OF SHORTCUTS

“Why hurry over beautiful things? Why not linger and enjoy them?”

PROMITI PROVA CHOWDHURY

Very recently, I completed a course on acting at a renowned theatre school in Dhaka. I joined the one-year course with a motive to regain ‘myself’ after being bogged down with depression and anxiety triggered by multiple factors. As days passed, I started to pat myself on the back for making the right choice. However, about six months later, an SMS arrived saying that the authorities had suspended the course as the attendance was thinning; the regular students would be summoned in due time, they told us.

A few months later, the authorities called up and said a new batch had enrolled for a six-month course and we, the previous batch, could join them to finish ours. At the orientation programme, the principal said the duration of the course—which is in its 28th year—was reduced to half because people these days are not willing to attend classes throughout the year, but are instead looking for shortcuts to being screened on television.

There is nothing wrong in wishing to become a celebrity overnight. Who among us does not have such dreams? We have little control over our desires, sure, but as German musician Clara Schumann said, “Why hurry over beautiful things? Why not linger and enjoy them?”

The internet is teeming with articles catering 7-step plans to lose pounds in just a week. There are even courses that people can purchase online to find their true love in 27 days. We also have shortcuts that will supposedly help us

Facebook Messenger, with a sad emoji? When we hurriedly write ‘tc’ (take care) to someone in a chat box and shift to another, where a completely different thread of conversation is flowing, do we really show concern for the person?

Apps and e-commerce services that bring restaurant food and even groceries to our doorsteps are great shortcuts. We are often busy and stressed, so meeting our cravings and needs instantly can save us time and effort. However, walking to a nearby shop, inspecting the products, bargaining a little, or even

authorities these days charge Tk 200 to laminate textbooks.

Gone are the days when it was a joint task of both parent and child to make covers for new books and copies. Calendar papers or brown papers were reserved for the task. While parents made the covers, children would help by cutting and folding the papers into the right shapes. They would place tapes and very carefully write down their names, roll numbers, subjects and title of the book on the fresh-smelling cover, using their favourite ink and fancy fonts.



discover whether our partners are really into us—“Seven signs that s/he’s not just that into you” or “seven signs that s/he’s totally into you”! Similarly, there are articles with points that you can check off to determine whether you are a terrible, toxic parent or if your parenting skills are out of this world.

Looking for and taking shortcuts not only deprive us of the sheer joy of learning, but also leaves us with diminished focus, observation and concentration.

When I was a child, I remember the sound of my mother tearing up sheets of paper when writing letters to her brother late at night. She wanted the letters to be flawless, free from spelling errors or overwriting. Most importantly, she would draft them over and over to make sure that the letter carried the genuineness of her affections.

Basically, she wanted to be understood. We all do. That’s the main objective of communication. But how many times have you felt content and fully at peace after apologising to someone by text message, or on

engaging in a simple chat with the shopkeeper may, in fact, release some of the stress.

A friend of mine recently said that he has been busy with a write-up. When I asked him which institution or newspaper/portal he was writing for, his answer was Facebook. Another shortcut! Singers crooning only on YouTube and writers writing solely on Facebook are fine, but wouldn’t it be cooler and more rewarding if you showcased your talent on more appropriate platforms and to such an extent that instead of you chasing the world, it becomes the other way round? But that requires practice, time and effort. Not shortcuts.

This tendency towards shortcuts is not limited to our virtual existence; it has crept into most aspects of our lives at a time when the widespread perception is that there is never enough time for the little things that we used to do even a generation ago.

Tamanna Rahman (not her real name), mother of a five-year-old boy who attends a renowned English-medium school in Dhaka, said the school

But now, the shortcuts save (read omit) the family time that children could have enjoyed with their parents, while also generating some business for a particular sector.

Shortcuts may not be as productive as they seem. They can nurture the wrong habits in us and undermine our true potential. In today’s world we see many businesses gladly selling such strategies to those who are looking for magical quick fixes to feel good.

Be it in the professional or personal sphere, the very concept of the shortcut is that you forego the things that may seem insignificant—the warts-and-all discoveries during a relationship, the formative experience of writing something of a standard higher than that required by Facebook’s ‘post’ button, the experience of involving your child in their school responsibilities, etc.—but which are really important in forming who we are. Shortcuts may even meet needs temporarily but in the longer term, the outcomes are not likely to be pleasant for the shortcut seekers.

Promiti Prova Chowdhury is a journalist.

PERSPECTIVE

On the busy Mirpur Road of Dhanmondi, students mill around outside a standard university building, converted from a shopping mall. Standing out, yet blending in, among the students are several Somali and Nigerians students—a small but growing body adding to foreign students studying at public and private universities in Dhaka.

Far from his home in the northern state of Jigawa in Nigeria, Faisal Muhammad, 26, studies at Daffodil International University (DIU). He has been living in Dhaka since 2015 and has just completed a Master’s in public health, specialising in epidemiology. Now, he plans to go on to study for a PhD in health economics at the University of Dhaka. He shares an apartment with four other Nigerians in Mohammadpur.



Ayoola Kehinde Asisat, outside Daffodil International University where she has been studying since 2013.

PHOTOS: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO



It was not easy, coming to Bangladesh on a student visa. At the time, there was no Bangladeshi High Commission in Nigeria—Muhammad had to go get a visa all the way from Morocco. When quizzed as to why he decided on Bangladesh, he says, “It is cost-effective to study here as you get good quality education while tuition fees and living costs in Dhaka are affordable. This is why many Nigerian and other African students come here to study.”

Muhammad came to know of DIU through a Nigerian friend who already studied there and who helped him through the application process. Much like Bangladeshi students abroad who help out others apply to their universities in countries in Europe and North America, African students use their networks to apply to universities in Bangladesh, such as DIU, Islamic University of Technology and the University of Information Technology and Sciences. Foreign students are increasingly drawn to private universities over public ones nowadays—according to the latest data available from the University Grants Commission, 1,927 were enrolled in the former and only 355 in the latter in 2016.

Muhammad, for one, does not find the stares and constant requests for photos or selfies in the street, intrusive or offensive. “Bangladeshis love blacks—they’re always asking for a picture with me. We are just like celebrities here,” he says, with a laugh. He attributes this to similarities in Nigerian and Bangladeshi culture, such as a shared religion, Islam, and common dietary staples such as rice. When faced with any problems on the streets, Muhammad says a little Bangla (“bhalo achen?”) goes a long way. But most of his friends are other Nigerians and Africans, pointing to the fact that for black students, a limited social circle is the norm. Regardless, “Bangladesh is my second home, after Nigeria,” comments Muhammad, who wants to

BEING BLACK IN DHAKA

MALIHA KHAN

continue to study and work here.

While Dhaka does not pretend to be cosmopolitan, other foreigners, especially Caucasians, are subject to the same stares and requests for photos but, less racially prejudiced. Black people and foreigners from parts of Southeast Asia on the other hand are subject to racist taunts such as “kaula” or “chinku” on the streets of Dhaka. “I have personally seen African football players being harassed on the streets with the words ‘kaula’ (meaning black, in a derogatory way),” writes a local on an online platform, discussing the prevalence of racism in Bangladesh. For years now, African players have dominated the local football scene, making up a majority of the footballers in the Bangladesh Premier League. But this has failed to change the perceptions of Bangladeshis. Will more and more African students studying here do the trick?

Many locals have a prejudiced view of blacks because African nationals are periodically in the news for police raids searching for those overstaying their visas. This has led to persisting stereotypes of criminality among Africans living in Dhaka. Prejudices abound that black foreigners are more likely to be criminals, illegally staying here, and poorer than their white counterparts. The latter are instead labelled ‘expatriates’ and thought more likely to be privileged and here legally.

Another Nigerian student at DIU is Ayoola Kehinde Asisat, 26, who has lived in Dhaka since 2013. Sharing

an apartment with other students, she has heard of past raids and fears the police here who, she says, do not discriminate between undocumented Africans and innocent students. “We share an apartment so we can split the costs but the police may come at any time to search our place and pat us down,” says Asisat, adding “It makes me afraid to live here.”

African students live like their university counterparts from other parts of Bangladesh, renting apartments near their universities in lower-middle-class and middle-class neighbourhoods—not the ‘posh’ areas white foreigners are expected to live in. Often up to five or seven in one apartment, they are charged higher rents than usual. Racial prejudice is displayed by landlords and other tenants, reluctant to rent to them.

Asisat and her roommates were told out of the blue by their landlord recently to leave by the end of the month. “He said he’s not comfortable with us living there anymore,” she recounts. She is now house hunting. “Yesterday, I went to look at several places in Lalmatia and all of the landlords said they want only married people or families. Or they just say, ‘bideshi na’, which is what they really mean.” On the other hand, many to-let signs on empty apartments in parts of the city say “Foreigners preferred” but tend to be meant for ‘rich’ whites.

Asisat has had no interaction with her neighbours or locals in the area. “They don’t understand English and don’t seem to want to talk to foreigners,” she says. But that does not stop them from pointing, staring, gossiping, or laughing at them in the streets. Asisat has encountered this frequently on her way to and from university and the shops, saying that it bothers her that people do not instead just come up and say hello. “If back home, they looked too much, I would just give them a slap. But I can’t try that here,” says Asisat wryly.

“Everyone at the university is nice,” she says of DIU where she studies pharmacy. But interaction outside the classroom is limited—she still has no close Bangladeshi friends and her circle, too, is largely made up of other Nigerian students. Prejudices run deep, even among the youth. In Asian countries as a whole, a legacy of European colonialism is perceived as having left lasting impressions of darker skin as indicative of a lower socioeconomic background. Far from the lifestyle of ‘expats’ for whom there are numerous clubs and restaurants catering exclusively to them, for Asisat, “There is not much to do here. I go to university, study, come back home.” While she says she does not feel unsafe in Dhaka, is she welcome? ■

ABOUT TOWN



A LITTLE BIT OF VIETNAM

Organiser: Clay Station Dhaka
May 11-12, 3-8 pm, Clay Station Dhaka, Block K, Banani



STAYING ALIVE WITH ELITA & FRIENDS

Organiser: Jete Chao? And Ajo Idea Space
May 12, 8 pm-9.30 pm, Ajo Idea Space, Sector 13, Uttara



THE LOWER DEPTHS

A PLAY BY MAXIM GORKY
Organiser: Department of Theatre and Performance Studies, DU
May 7-11, 7-11 pm, Nat Mandal, DU