

# AGE OF INNOCENCE

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“Songbadjog” on the second day of protests, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan said, “these young children are hurt and upset, we understand that, and they are out on the streets to express that sadness. We do not oppose any of that, we feel that they will return home on their own terms once they are done expressing their sorrow”.

What this sort of comment does is seize agency from a protest that is rightful and just. Using adjectives such as “emotional” to repeatedly describe and address protests employs a traditional dichotomy that what is emotional, cannot be rational. Therefore, it almost frames the protests as irrational, stemming from the grief of teenagers. However, the student movement was anything but irrational—in fact, it is a legitimate resistance against a corrupt public transport system that continuously fails to ensure safety for its citizens.

The infantilised sentiment continued throughout the news discourse in most mainstream channels. A prominent female journalist hosted a talk show on the fourth day of the protests, where she repeatedly framed the students as “abegspurno (full of emotions)”. While speaking to a student protestor on the phone, she commented that “you are very concise for your age” as if someone in their late teens shouldn’t have been able to articulate their thoughts in such a manner.

This linguistic rhetoric was effectively reducing these protestors to unthinking beings. This was in part possible because the protestors were actually young. So, using *kishor-kishori*, for example, is not exactly wrong. What is wrong, though, is thinking that *kishor-kishoris* are devoid of thinking abilities that can make dignified demands to the government. Inserting a sense of cognitive vulnerability when speaking about the teenaged protestors not only exhibits a mistrust in a generation of future nation builders, but also creates ambiguity towards the demands made by this group.

This sense of mistrust was further propagated when social media activity by the youth increased following the Saturday attacks on protestors in Jhigatola which media outlets were not able to properly report on. Several journalists were attacked whilst trying to obtain footage of what was happening, including journalists from print media. Ekattor TV was served a notice requesting them to be cautious of

# THE KIDS ARE ALL RIGHT

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effectively deny the very basic right to live? If now Dhaka had turned into a troubled zone, it is not because the students failed; it is because we collectively failed our children, our future citizens.  
Let us not forget that these children still believe in the nation-state. They believed that this government could deliver if they were willing. They believed that justice and the spirit of 1971 were more than mere slogans for

# Television right now-



IMAGE: COLLECTED

instigating “public disorder”. Furthermore, internet connection was slow and therefore, people were unable to see live videos from the scene. One could say that there was almost an absence of credible information during the 24 hours following the midday violence at Jhigatola, turning the internet into a cradle of conspiracies.

Once the confusion settled and media resumed reporting, the mistrust towards the youth’s sense of judgment persisted. Ever since the cabinet minister and even the prime minister had declared solidarity with the cause of road safety, the common language used to refer to the protests was *jouktik* (rational). But there’s a catch! The positive coining of the protest is entering the discourse when government officials are claiming that “vested quarters” are trying to seize the momentum of such a logical protest. This new “logical” essence, however, still assumes that teenagers are wildly prone to solicitation; that while their demand may have been logical, they themselves may not have a good sense of judgement since they fell for online rumours. After

all, they are still children.  
The prime minister, in her speech on August 6, while inaugurating fibre optics connection in 300 unions, referred to the protestors as *shishu* (children) who should be brought home by their guardians before any “third-party” harms them. From *kishor-kishori* to *shishu*, it seems that the cognitive agency of the protestor continues to slide down the age scale. The abstract intellect of the student protestors slowly proved to be a ground for political parties, on every end, to make a claim. The hot word, then, in the post-Saturday phase of the discourse became *ushkani* (instigation), according to a talk show host, who hosted an hour-long programme on fake news and instigation.

What was missing from the general talk show discussions on Sunday and Monday across most TV channels, were the repeated attacks by the police and other plainclothes men on university campuses across the capital. Of course, an exhaustive analysis is beyond the scope of this article, but it doesn’t take much for one to grasp the general trend

after scanning through a handful of prominent TV channels. DBC’s talk show, “Rajkahon”, hosted by Nobonita Chowdhury, discussed legal barriers to improving the transport system while Ekattor TV’s “Journal” was more concerned about traffic maintenance. Channel 24 centred their talk show “Muktobak” on August 6 around migrant rights.

Save for one segment in DBC news, “Shongbad Shomprosharon”, which spoke of the politicisation of the neutral student movement, news channels were more concerned about the new transport instead of the unlawful attacks on the students. The TV stations perused by yours truly were unable to host any prominent minister or ruling party spokesperson who could shed more light on the political turn this protest has taken. With this approach, perhaps the silence is what made these attacks appear political and created suspicion amongst television viewers across the country.

What I found most intriguing in the way we talk about this people’s protest, at the time of writing this article, is the absence of testimonies from the ground. Beginning from the first phase of the protests on July 30, only a few student participations could be observed in the talk shows, especially in physical presence. The very youth which was adamantly vocal over social media, was left out during discussion in mainstream media. While social media is being antagonised for the spread of unverified news, it is worth realising that it gave a platform to voices on the ground which TV channels failed to incorporate in their news.

It is uncertain to me what new angle the discussion surrounding the protests would take by the time this article will be published. But I hope that talk show hosts, politicians, and policy makers, don’t lose sight of their responsibility to the people—that whatever they choose to disclose or not disclose on mass media will have certain effects on people. Students can lose trust in what prominent personalities say on TV—and by extension, in the media, just as they did in policymakers. Just because the protestors are young, politicians and news hosts should not treat them with negligence. They must approach this apolitical movement with the dignity and agency that it deserves.

**Disclaimer: For citation purposes, only segments available on TV channel’s official YouTube were cited here.**

won their cause. All they tried to do is alter the language of the state, to transform the state from one that ‘governs’ and ‘disciplines’ into one that *nurtures*.  
Did we not want them to be dreamers and doers? To be upright, just, able-bodied citizens who will build the nation of the future? Was not their protest a basic leap of faith? A plea for a politics of life and nurturance? How could we have denied them the love that they deserve, a space for the nurture they need to become conscious citizens? How could we nip them in the bud?

The names of the authors have been withheld on their request.

July 29 was just another mundane Sunday, and one of us crossed the intersection of Shaheed Ramiz Uddin Cantonment School and College at around 10 am, on the way to work. But this day was unlike others, and no one could have known that, in a mere two hours, Rajib, Meem, and many of their school/college friends would be mowed down by a speeding bus—of the *Jabale Nur Paribahan*—trying to beat another raging bus to the stop, as is so common on Dhaka’s busy Airport Road. Neither Rajib nor Meem survived, while the other school-children barely came out of the carnage alive.

# THE KIDS ARE ALL RIGHT POLITICAL POSSIBILITIES AND THE FAILURE OF A NATION

## AN ACCOUNT OF TWO EYE WITNESSES TO THE MOVEMENT

We say no one could have known about the brutality to come. But what happened next was even more unthinkable. After all, it was just another ‘accident’.

We are the world’s reserve army of cheap lives, are we not? Our lives are disposable, dispensable. Students lose their limbs and die; sometimes they are thrown—wounded—to drown in the river. It is difficult, if not impossible, to know what it is to live in a city like ours, unless one calls this place home. Some of us are fortunate—our commutes are shorter, the streets in front our homes still survive, and we rarely find ourselves in need of public transportation. But for the vast majority of the millions we share our city with, this is a place of permanent precarity. One exists here forever in a state of emergency, in a state of competition of all against all. The arteries are clogged, the blood is toxic, and the bones are washing away. We do not need to fall back on problematic rankings and measures to know what we all know: this city is unliveable.

Dhaka is where all the contradictions and pathologies that constitute Bangladesh congeal, pathologies that include the sheer disposability of human life and the breakdown of collective answerability—the basis of human sociality. Forget extrajudicial killings, industrial murder, and settler colonialism. Our lives are just as likely to be interrupted by a pulverized road or a speeding car, and no one will answer for it.

This time, however, was different. By 5 pm, the students of the school were out *en masse*. Dressed defiantly in their school uniforms and quickly joined by students from all over Dhaka, they occupied the city and claimed the entire urban space as the ground on which they would make their claim to life and justice. They shut down the city and then gave it new life. The student movement that erupted in Dhaka and then



spread outwards—an ‘occupy’ movement if there ever was one—was, above all else, a resounding, collective disavowal of this very disposability, and an unshakeable insistence on the ethical primacy of life.  
School kids were joined by young adults, Bangla medium students were joined by their English medium comrades. They took over every major intersection and claimed the right to do what the police have consistently failed to do—forcing all to drive in appropriate lanes, checking licenses, registration, and fitness papers. Car keys were confiscated and handed over to the traffic police, and unfit vehicles spray-painted for all to see. No one escaped the ‘levelling crowd,’ not police sergeants, nor ministers. These children articulated their politics through witty slogans and internet memes, reaching back into the past to re-energise a time-tested rhetoric.

Simple slogans like “1952, 1969, 1971, 1990, 2018” were brilliant rejections of patron-client partisan politics, drawing instead on the memory of historic moments when citizens reclaimed the state; slogans like “Stop liking news on Facebook; join us on the street,” expressed the necessity of dissidence in real life as opposed to virtual activism. “Caution! Sorry for the inconvenience, the nation is under construction” slammed a sense of perspective onto critics of the movement, and those who yearned for ‘normalcy.’

Many left-liberal intellectuals and activists felt nostalgic; for them, this movement brought back the memory of May 1968, of the unified student-worker movement that occupied Paris and then Europe at large; some labelled it as the ‘Guerrilla Spring.’ This urge is understandable; but even though this movement drew



PHOTOS: COLLECTED



on the resources of the past, we must look past our natural romanticism and see what made this a unique moment of resistance. Our children did something extraordinary—they managed to initiate a measured, disciplined transversal movement that was at the same time a mass uprising. In claiming justice and a safe space for themselves and ALL their fellow citizens, they showed us how a defiantly non-partisan movement could be resolutely political, dissenting against a dysfunctional state apparatus and certain inept, irresponsible, and unethical functionaries. They showed how limited resources, training, and experience cannot stop sheer will, determination, integrity, and love for the nation and its people.

Yes, whenever a protest continues for longer than a week, there is every chance for external, malicious forces to infiltrate and try to take advantage of the situation—we have seen this time and again. It is also true that, in our confusion, panic, fear, and anger, we are prone to misreport and misrepresent, especially if the media remains silent. But who, except those who choose to remain silent and refuse to listen to reason, can justify the fact that now the blood of young students is smeared across the streets of Dhaka, bullets and tear gas shells have been shot at unarmed civilians, machetes hurled at students, cameras broken and phones confiscated whenever a citizen tried to document the carnage? How was it possible for the state to completely misread the innocent demand for safe space and then

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