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in the Middle East. What he wouldn't do to go back to all of that, to earn his own living, to drive the car through the sand dunes, take his children to the beach, drink black coffee with his friends and smoke hookah.

He had been a young man when he came to this desert land. He had tried his hands at everything that required basic educational qualification but mere grit. When his ailing father passed away, the war had just ended and he was planning to go to college in Dhaka.

His father had taken him to Dhaka once, when he was a kid. And he remembered he took him to show horse-racing and he was hooked. He had decided, he would grow up and come to the glittery red-blue city and spend hours watching horse-racing.

Those dreams had remained unrealised, as life happened to him, relentlessly, trying to beat him down.

But Shafiq did not give up. A week after his father died, he jumped onto a train that travelled through his village and decided he would go to Chittagong.

He remembered his encounter with the shadow in his village home as child, one which he believed had killed his father. He remembered how decisively he had escaped that shadow.



ILLUSTRATION: NOOR US SAFA ANIK

He had heard from his older cousins that that is where all the business was.

Now, he does not remember much of it. He remembers hauling bags of clothes and sacks of sugar in the port city to make some money, so that he could return home to his siblings. So that he could at least provide them with some semblance of a normal life—food, clothes, maybe a chance to go to school.

It would be a couple of years, before his maternal uncle ultimately sent him abroad. He was 23, but Shafiq by then was sure of himself. He knew he wanted to move away from here, make money, because that is what makes the world go round and round.

In the many years he spent in the Middle East, Shafiq was quick to climb the

ladder to the top. It was a classic movie in the making but did not things get better in the movies, at least in the end? Was he not the protagonist of his movie?

He continued to lie in bed, moving between timelines in his head. His life—the village—hopping around Bangladesh—the business in the middle east—coming for a visit—losing his mind—and eventually having to settle in the country—all of this continued to flash before his eyes.

He remembered his encounter with the shadow in his village home as child, one which he believed had killed his father. He remembered how decisively he had escaped that shadow. Until he decided to return to Bangladesh, only for a month after spending nearly two decades abroad.

He did not think the shadow would be able to get him. How could he let that happen? He had dodged her for so many years. Yet, that night, when she came, asking him to open the lock to his room, he knew life would never be the same. He would become his father, loathed, hated and lost to his family.

There were moments when the shadow would vanish. Somehow though, she managed to be fiercer as the night wore on, defying the laws of physics. When he was jailed in that enclosure, she came ever so fleetingly. She was particularly angry during winters. Sometimes he fought her for hours at night, sometimes she would talk to him and he would talk back to her.

Over the years, she became a regular presence, stronger and more at ease with him.

He tried to shake off these thoughts and tried to sit up straight. He thought about going and talking to his daughters but he knew, his heart sinking, that they too avoided him for fear of meeting the shadow. Like he had avoided his home for years.

His daughters were already all out of the house, one to her job, another for university and the little one to her school.

When he had come back home yesterday, none of his daughters were there. He felt scared and apprehensive of voicing his opinions in the house anymore, lest his family think he had lost his mind again and send him to jail.

He sat quietly all through the morning, staring at the TV, flipping through the channels and wondering how he would spend the rest of the day. There was no one to talk to.

Maybe he should have remained in the jail. At least those wardens listened to his stories.

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

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Another time, I come across two children, one boy and one girl, both appear to be 10 or so, who are selling red roses in *Rabindra Sorobor*, an amphitheater, in the same park. As I sit alone on the circular brick bench that faces the main stage, jotting down the notes from my recent interviews, the young flower sellers come toward me. For a brief moment they scan me and my sides, and then they proceed to move away. *Ki ful dibā* Can I get a flower? I ask. *Apni to eka*, you are alone, replies the girl. I immediately break into loud laughter. They give me a puzzled look and leave. In the park, there are many young (seemingly) unmarried couples spending their moments of togetherness in a culture where dating or spending time together alone in one's home is heavily stigmatised. So, parks usually provide young lovers with a space to spend time together. I am alone. To the flower sellers, I am perhaps not a good candidate for buying flowers. I am really appalled at their smart salesmanship and *buddhi*, intellect, at their tender age. I wonder what would have become of them had they had an opportunity to grow up in an affluent family.

Korail: vulnerability and 'odhikar', rights

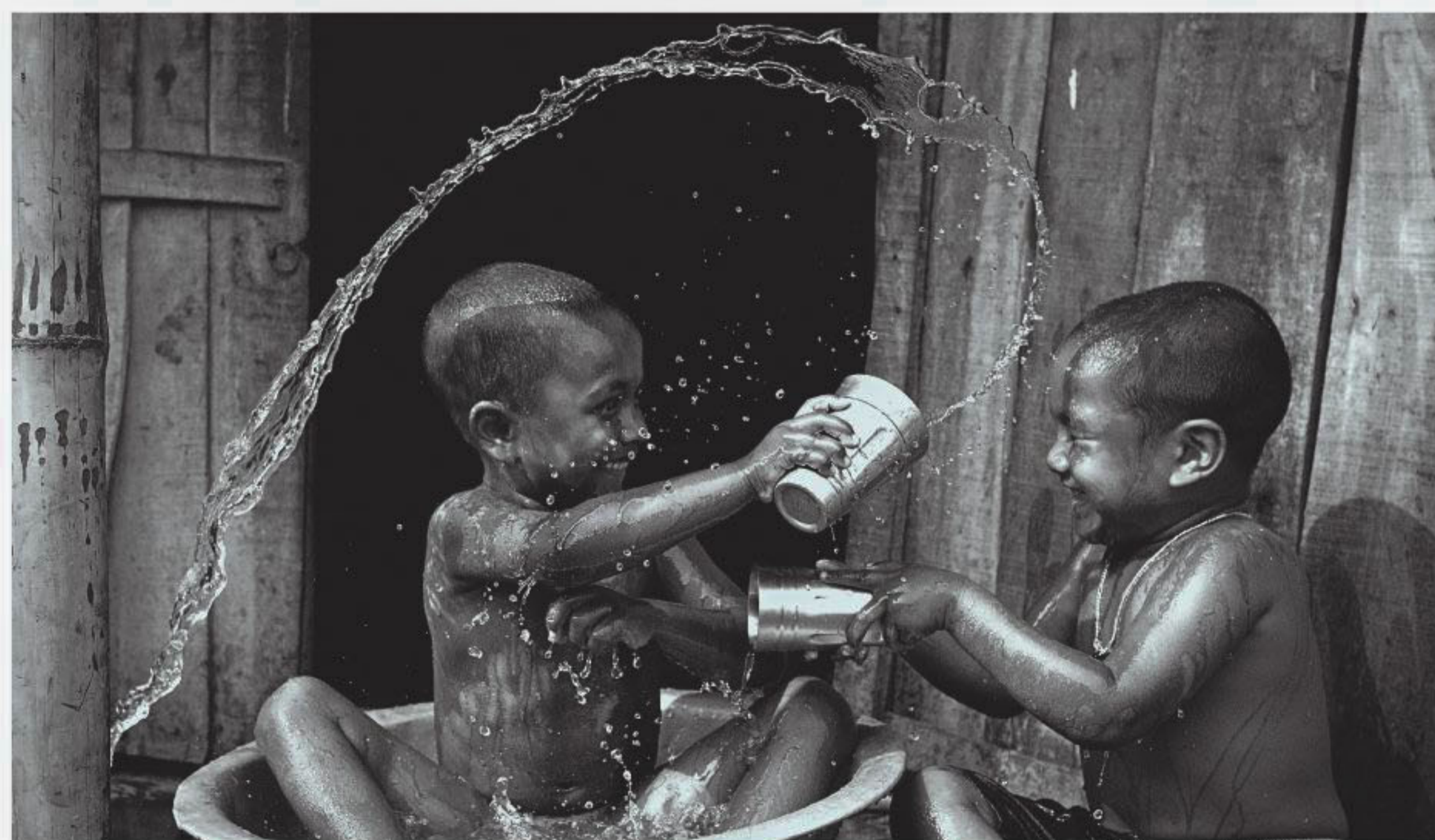


PHOTO: FARIDA ALAM

Their lives portray a mosaic of conflict, contestation, struggle, and serendipity.

The children who grow up in Korail slum, sprawled across 130 acres of land near Gulshan, one of the poshest neighbourhoods in Dhaka, are susceptible to illegal activities such as drug addiction and petty crime at a very young age. Children who do not have families or guardians to look after them often spend considerable amount of time on the street. Hence, they are at risk of getting involved with *madok*, drugs. We are considered *kharap*, bad, when we are on the street; everyone looks

down at us, says a boy in Korail slum, who spends a considerable part of his day on the street. *Amra to iccha kore rashtai ashi na*, we don't come to the street on our own, says another boy. *Amra gorib, tai ashi*, we are poor, that's why we come to the street, argues the boy matter-of-factly. Yet, among uncertainty, risk, and vulnerability that are part of the everyday lives of the children, hope still exists. To make a point about how a group of children I interviewed view their (imaginary) world—a

temporal place that is different from their *bastobota*, reality, on the street—I describe the following. This is their *odhikar*, rights, they told me:

We want to be in a world full of angels where there are no lies, no dishonesty, no sorrow, no insult, no beatings; where everyone—'choto', young, 'boro', adult—is considered to be equal; where life is built on love and affection.

A few afterthoughts

Although based on strictly visceral reflections, I offered some glimpses of empirical evidence of the informal lives of the (street) children in a city where power dynamics between the adults and the children, informality of the city and its many spaces and places, children's (lack of) agency and rights play a critical role that signifies the reality of the everyday lives of the marginal children whose lives can also be intricately connected with the street. In this vein, I have attempted to suggest that context is a critical factor in research about and with (street) children to understand their lives.

All names have been altered to maintain anonymity of the children. Iqbal Ahmed is a doctoral researcher in human geography at Durham University, UK currently conducting his fieldwork in Dhaka. He can be contacted at iqbal.ahmed@durham.ac.uk.