

THE DEFINITIVE  
**YOUTH**  
MAGAZINE

# SHOUT

DHAKA THURSDAY APRIL 29, 2021, BAISHAKH 16, 1428 BS

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DID THE PANDEMIC KILL  
STUDENTS' ACADEMIC  
DREAMS?

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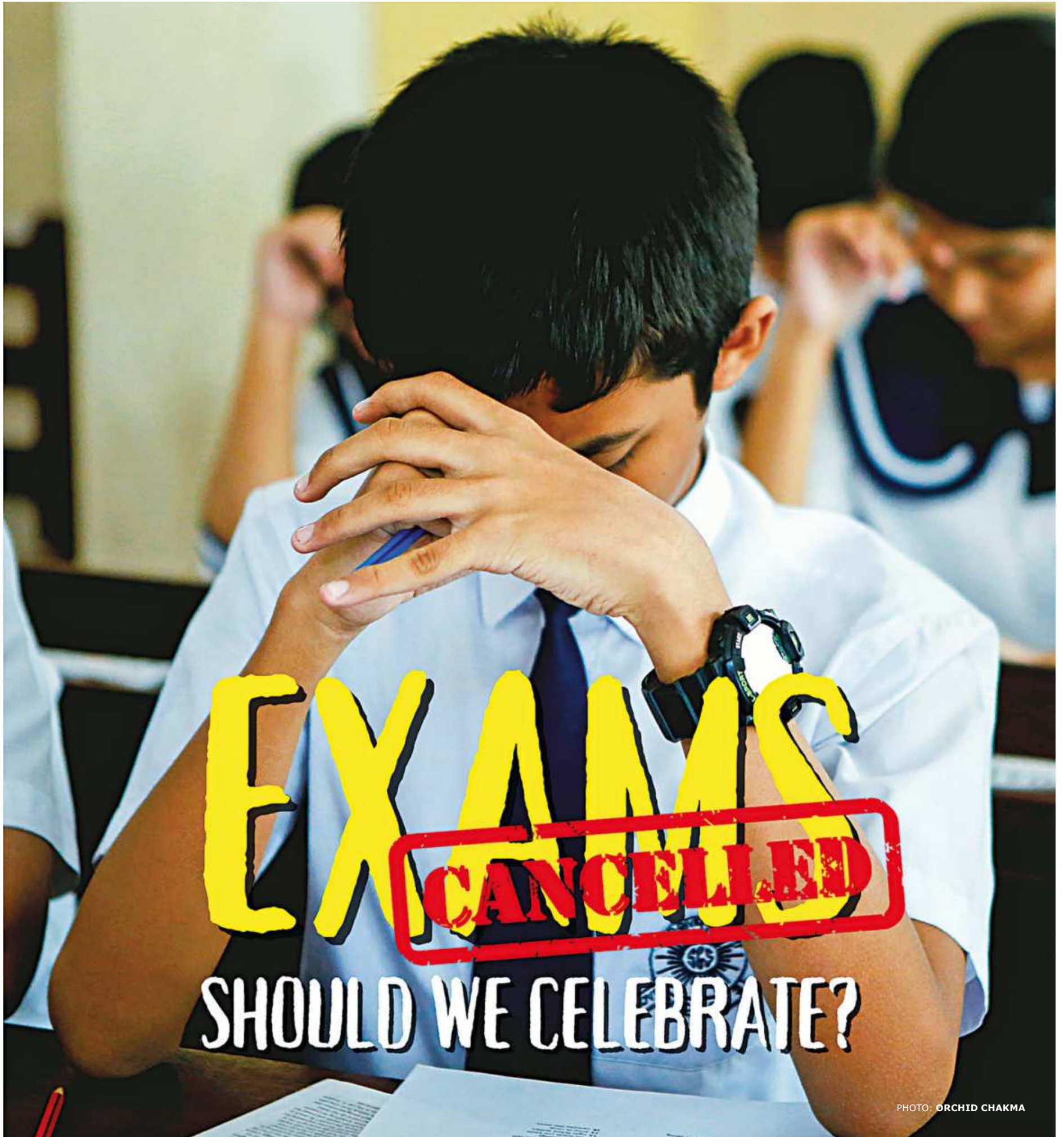


PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA



# EDITORIAL

One thing we don't want to live with is uncertainty. Sure, there may not be assurance or guarantee with everything but even that's better. Much like the Bangla proverb, "Dushtu gorur cheye shunno gowal bhalo." Sadly, the promising youth of our country who were ready to take on the world last year face a difficult task ahead, thanks to uncertainty.

Exams or no exams? Study or no study? In the search for an answer to these questions, we've spent an entire year. Not to mention the constant fear for their own lives, and the lives of their near and dear ones. Uncertainty and constant – what a dichotomy! Looking forward, who will ensure these hardworking kids get deserved scores and placements in their desired institutions? How is it fair for an entire generation to be dubbed as "the ones who got away with it"? The questions keep piling. We just keep looking for answers in the dark.

The virus attacked more than just our bodies. It infected our minds, our dreams.

Don't let it get to you. Wear a mask. Stay home.

-- Kazi Akib Bin Asad, Editor In-charge, SHOUT



## PLAYWATCH

### ALBUM REVIEW



## The Artist Reclaims Her Art

ANUPOMA JOYEETA JOYEE

When on April 9, Taylor Swift re-released the entire *Fearless* album, now called *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, containing 27 songs, it might have come as a surprise to most because all the new tracks sound completely similar to her older recordings. Then what's the point to all of this?

Since 2019 Swift had been in a legal battle with her old label, Big Machine Records. Founder Scott Borchetta, once her ally, sold off the label and with that the "masters" (original recording of a song from which subsequent copies are made for sales) of her first six albums to Scooter Braun, in whose hands Swift had been bullied and tormented for a long time. Braun then sold those masters to a third party which meant she would not own the rights to those anymore and if she wanted to make copies of those albums for sales or redistribution, she would have to negotiate with Braun.

That is now going to change. With the release of *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, Swift will once again own her masters.

Her old *Fearless* songs sound almost exactly the same in the re-recording, but with much better vocals and cleaner instrumental arrangement. This time, she hits the notes more firmly; her voice is stronger and reflects the standard which she had to reach to thrive in this industry for 16 years.

The musical merit of *Fearless* was not up for much debate when Swift first released it in 2008, so that is not what this review seeks to do. Swift made an amazing business move by including her songs 'from the vault' which she had written around the same time when *Fearless* was


first released. As a young female artist, she did not have the freedom to surmount the limitations her label put on her and could not release some of those songs as part of the album at that time.

However, with a career seasoned with theatrics and scrutiny, she serves it back to Braun and Borchetta who clearly underestimated the kind of power Swift holds. She has included 6 new songs on *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, not only to give her fans access to her art that had been long buried, but also to make a point. Fans who enjoy her music will now definitely choose to buy her new record as it contains fresh, never before heard music as well as the old ones.

Not many artists get the opportunity to do what Taylor Swift will do in the coming months with the re-release of her albums. While many would say that she is lucky to be able to do it, it is important to note that it is purely her hard work and diligence that has created this opportunity. Apart from being a testimony to her mastery as a lyricist and storyteller even when she was a teenager, *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* above all is a tale of caution for entitled executives like Braun and Borchetta, who wished to exploit a contract signed by a naïve 15-year-old.

Like all the feuds Taylor Swift has ever been in, she is winning this one too and she is giving her fans the rare gift of perfecting what they had already grown to love for many years, while also giving herself the extraordinary satisfaction of reclaiming her own art.

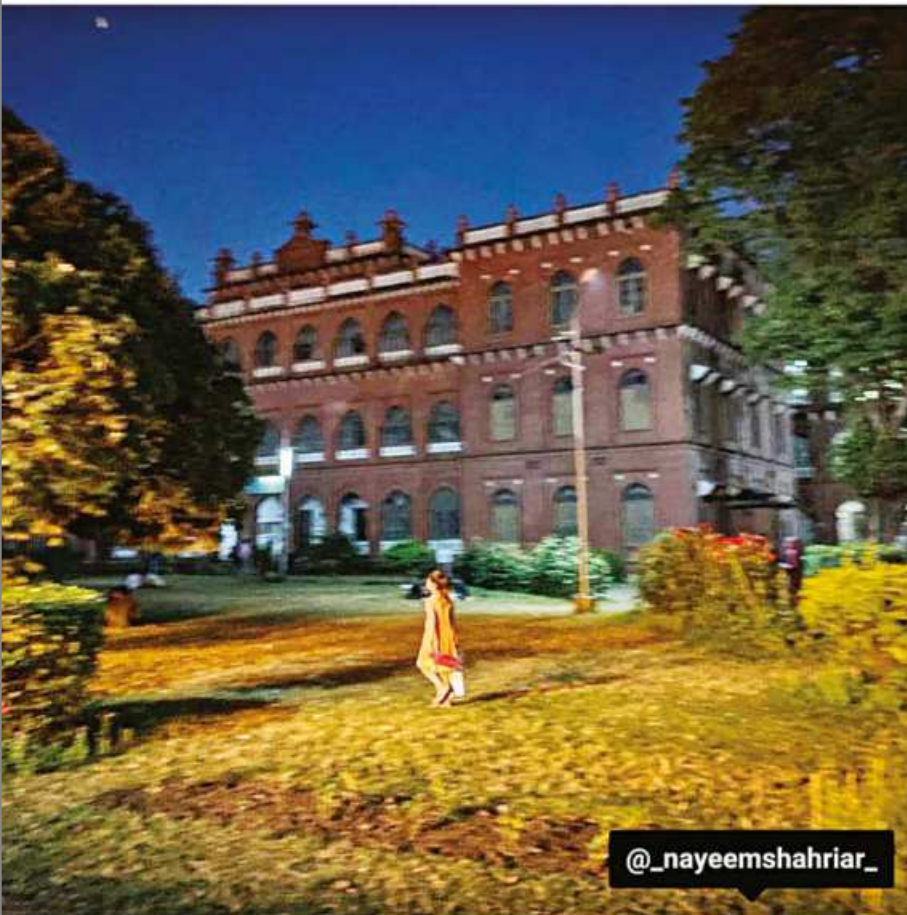
*Anupoma Joyeeta Joyee's favourite song in Fearless (Taylor's Version) is Change. Tell her about yours at anupomajoyee@gmail.com*



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# Did the pandemic kill students' academic dreams?

**AMRIN TASNIM RAFA**

About halfway through March exactly a year ago, I made an assumption that went wrong like nothing else in my experience had ever gone wrong before.

Finals that covered a year's worth of content were a month away. I was supposed to complete revision while spending the larger chunk of my day outside. At the peak of my stresses, the announcement of school closure felt like the perfect solution. We would be obliged to go back to the normal routine after a short while, all caught up and well rested. Or so I thought.

The events that took place over the last year appear now to me to be blurry and overwhelming upon attempts to recall. Students in the national curriculum wallowed in painful uncertainty while the authorities decided when and how to take the HSC and SSC exams. Meanwhile, international curriculum students had to come to terms with the reality of predicted grades based upon the grades they received in mocks they took just as preparation for the actual exams.

Despite it being obvious upon observation that the vast majority of students had gone through some extent of mental struggle, I arranged a small survey to gain a statistical grasp on the magnitude of the situation, where high school students, aged 15-19, were asked a few questions assessing their mental health.

Sixty-eight percent of the 147 respondents expressed that they did not believe grades received through teacher assessment were fair, and 70 percent said they felt the need to lessen their expectations or goals regarding higher education. When asked how the system of online classes affected their mental health, over 90 percent shared that it took a turn for the worse.

The group of focus in this article aren't the kids who are prodigies or have superior intellect, but the ones who try and apply consistent effort into academics. Eventually, they become accustomed to a certain level of high achievement, which might get embedded into their identity (either due to their own assessment of self or the influence of people surrounding them). This almost always leads to the burden of heightened expectations looming over their heads. Along with that comes the tendency of tying academic performance with their sense of self-worth. When the system



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

of effort leads to a proportional reward, and they've been accustomed to become disarranged during the pandemic, quite the mental chaos ensues.

Upon discussion with a few of these individuals, it was evident that unwillingness to study is just a small part of a wide spectrum of emotional challenges faced. Being isolated from peers was a major basis of anxiety. Feelings of being underprepared in comparison to peers were magnified as not being able to attend classes together meant how other people were coping or whether they were struggling too could not be seen.

My own experience consisted of constantly being in a state of painful confusion. After a few months of trying and failing to stay focused and motivated, I started to question my priorities. It took more willpower and effort to achieve a good grade than ever before. I wondered if it was worth it, whether this was what I wanted. When I tried to prioritise taking care of myself over keeping to the top of my coursework, my fall in performance seemed to take an even harder toll on me. Things seemed to get out of hand with me constantly comparing myself to my peers. My self-esteem suffered new lows.

Fayyad Ahmmed, a very ambitious grade 10 student of Scholastica shared with me quite a comprehensive account of his experience during the pandemic. He said, "The primary source of all dissatisfaction was the uncertainty of the situation. I discovered that I lost my ability to focus on anything. When 4 out of the 7 members of my household

got infected by Covid-19, I started to lose all hope. I started to lose myself, and thought that even if I could meet my friends again, I would not be able to connect with them anymore. I was probably straight on course to implode under my own pressures."

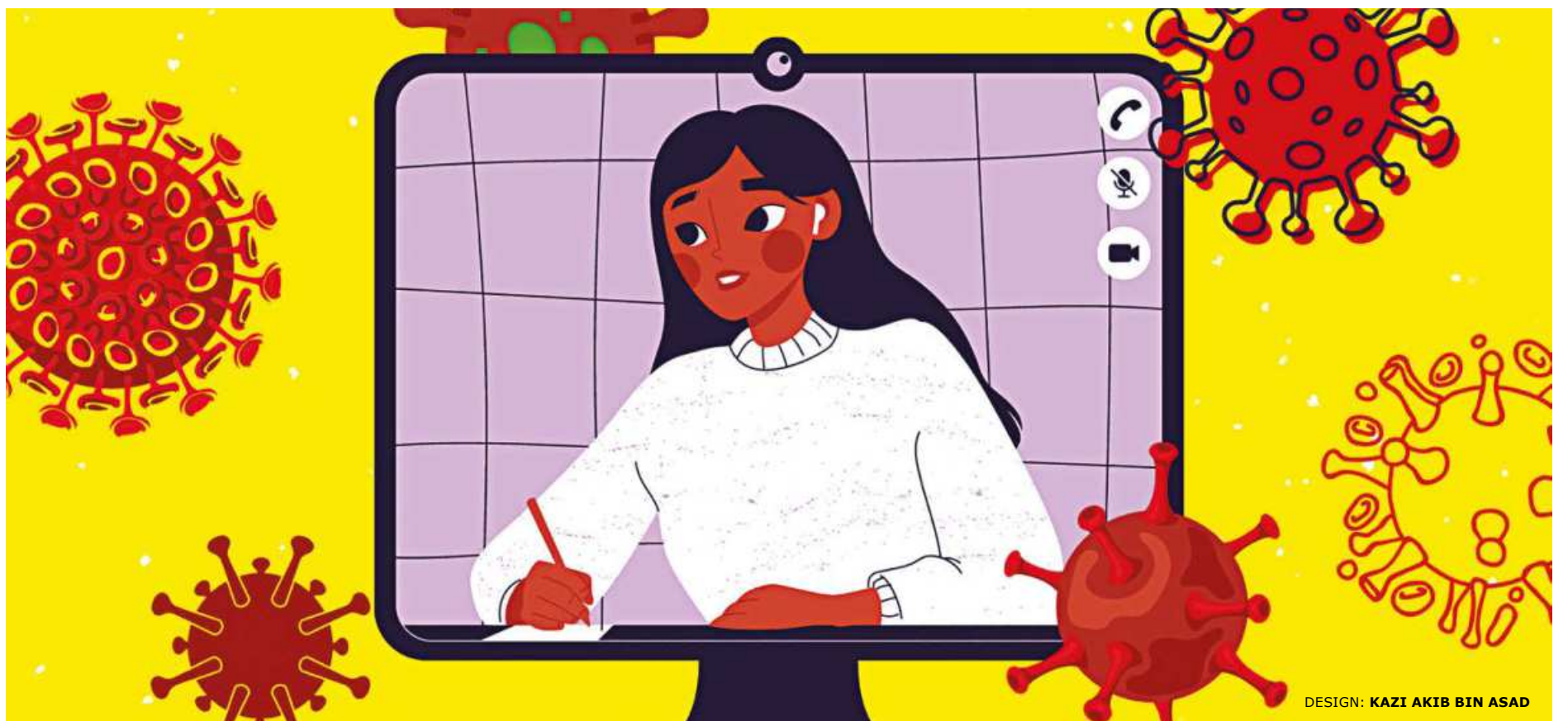
Abdullah Al Nafees, an SSC 2020 candidate from Sylhet Cadet College, thought that the situation needed to be handled in a way that was fair for all. "We did have online classes, but attendance was very low as a lot of my classmates live in remote areas with little to no access to the internet. Despite being driven students, many were left in the dark regarding preparation for SSC exams, with simply dropping out of school not being uncommon. Maybe schools should be opened for the kids who do not have the option of online learning," he commented.

The primary issue faced by all students appeared to be lack of proper atmosphere and the monotonous routine. Drop in grades led to renewed attempts to revive motivation, which eventually gave out not after long. Most experienced being trapped in an almost identical cycle of anguish.

The uncertainty regarding examinations provided added pressure to maintain good records throughout the academic term. Despite being faced with an abundance of challenges and a complete shift from the usual system of academics, many felt like they had only themselves to blame. A common sentiment was that not having to commute had provided a lot of time previously unavailable. Feelings of guilt for failing to use this time and further polish performance were prevalent.

The pandemic, despite being calamitous, brought something for everyone to learn from. Maybe for certain students, it was to not become too mentally invested in one aspect of life. Whatever benefits individual students have reaped from the pandemic, we can be sure that everyone is looking forward to attending long hours of physical classes at school once again, and will enjoy them when the day finally arrives. Merely a year ago, nobody could have seen that one coming, right?

*Amrin Tasnim Rafa is always confused, it's literally her dominant personality trait. She challenges you to find something she won't think is confusing. Try your luck at [fb.com/amrintasnim.rafa](https://fb.com/amrintasnim.rafa)*



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD



# Habits to Make You a Better Reader

HIYA ISLAM

No matter why you read, there is always a nagging voice at the back of your mind that tells you to become a better reader. And simply reading every day is not enough.

LET GO

First things first, drop the book if you don't enjoy it. Normalise abandoning a book and not feeling guilty about it – it is no sin. Instead of torturing yourself with a bad book, use the time to find a better read. Bad books kill time and keep you from discovering the richness of the literary world.

But when should you quit a book? Basically, whenever reading becomes a chore and you'd pretty much rather do anything but face that book. That being said, it doesn't mean once you drop it, you can never go back. Maybe you feel bad about not liking the classic everyone raves about. You may not understand a book the first time; give the author the benefit of the doubt. And if things still don't work out, there's something called the "rule of 50" where you read the first 50 pages before you decide to give up or commit.

BE FUSSY WITH SELF-HELP BOOKS

Your time is valuable; read selectively. Many self-help books are regurgitating the same facts and notions. Why not skip to Chapter 10 (which is why you bought the book) instead of dragging yourself through the entire title? Better yet, find

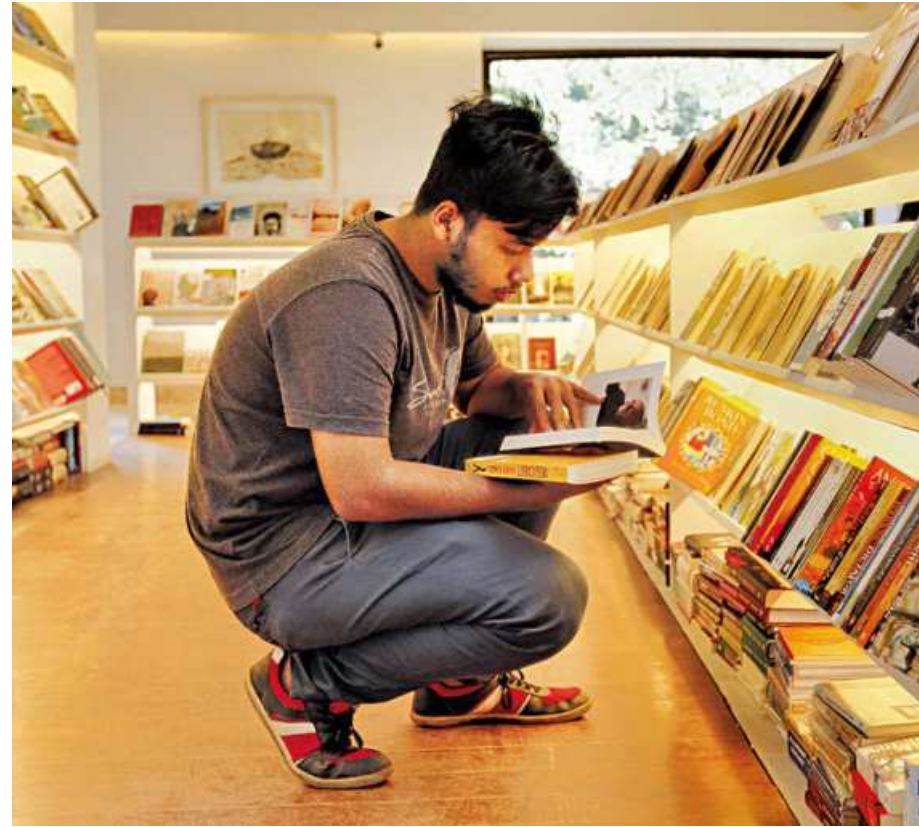


PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

the book summary on the web; cover three hundred pages under 15 minutes (obviously *only* for self-help books).

ONE IS TOO FEW

Read more than one book at a time,

preferably two or three. It gives you a break from the scene and by the time you return to a book, you'll feel more absorbed. Perhaps this could get you through a book you thought you'd never finish. Make

sure to form a balance between the heavy reads with light ones and select the genres comfortably. This way you can read more books, too!

THE RIGHT BOOK WILL CLICK

A series of bad books can potentially drive you away from a worthwhile hobby, especially for a beginner. Don't just grab the closest book you find. Look for recommendations online. Follow your favourite celebrity's reading list. Talk about books. Ask your friends for suggestions. If you're at the shop, make a go at the first 5 pages or so before you thump it on the cash counter.

YOU'RE NEVER TOO BUSY TO READ

Make use of the "hidden hours" in a day. On an average day, there are many instances where you can squeeze in some reading. Think of your daily commute and waiting queues. You'd be surprised at how much reading you can get done during breakfast every day. Besides, the hours unnecessarily spent on social media and such can find a new use. It is not about finding the time to read but rather creating the time for it.

Carry a book in your bag or phone. Set some reading goals and track your reading habits. Sooner or later, you will find your niche and the authors that cater to your tastes given that you persist in the pursuit.

*Hiya loves food that you hate by norm – broccoli, pineapple pizza and Bounty bars. Find her at hiyaislam.11@gmail.com*



PHOTOS: ORCHID CHAKMA

## EXAMS CANCELLED: *Should We Celebrate?*

ABHOY HRIDDO & ANUSHA MOURSHED

Many of us approached 2021 as if the coronavirus would magically disappear and the world would slowly return to normalcy. Unfortunately, that did not work out. With even more cases every day, the uncertainty piled on.

While many students have had to cope up with the loss of loved ones, others felt underprepared after doing a whole year worth of classes online. Naturally, due to unforeseeable and inconceivable circumstances, students found it extremely difficult to cope up with their academics alongside maintaining a stable mental health and resorted to demanding that the O & A Level examinations be cancelled. The risk factor of catching the virus was the most prominent contributing factor to the exam cancellation. Although their reasons are justified under the current circumstances, will the future implications work out in their favour, in the long run?

As Edexcel has decided to cancel exams worldwide, drastic measures were taken to grade the students. Schools have had to take mock after mock exams to determine their final grades. To make matters even more hectic, the board has also offered schools a chance to provide students with "unseen papers" made by them. Ultimately, the whole thing boils down to sitting for exams at home. Edexcel has declared that they will also provide their own checkers to get a better understanding of a student's skills and to ensure accuracy. On the bright side, these are just options; the unseen papers are not mandatory.

Unlike last year, many Edexcel students are quite unhappy that the exams got cancelled. Others have mixed feelings.

Ariq Hussain, A2 student of South Breeze School, mentions, "I think there are two sides to the coin here. I am glad that I don't have to sit for exams physically where chances of contracting the virus would increase exponentially and being an asthma patient myself, my life would be at risk. On the other hand, the increased workload and early deadlines set by the examination board have been taking a toll on my fellow students and myself both mentally and physically and it seems sitting for an actual exam would be less pressurising."

It is no surprise that exam cancellation

has also led to a lot of students slacking off academically which may have some severe implications in the future. Thus, many students are concerned that they will have to put in extra effort in their universities.

"Without the exams, the degree of how much a student has learned sitting at home, in my opinion, will fluctuate drastically from one person to another. I think some won't be prepared and will be forced to start from ground zero in university while others who kept their studies in check will go into their freshman year well prepared," says Faraz Rahman Khan of

not receive the grades they truly deserve.

"This past year has been extremely strenuous for me, and many other students who have been eagerly waiting to sit for a fair exam to judge their true potential. However, due to the uncertainty of Covid-19 and having to adapt to remote learning at our respective homes, it's been really stressful to devote focus and concentration to what was being taught in online classes. Even students like me, who maintained perfect attendance throughout the academic session, were left in a whirlpool of dilemma as to how we will be graded this year. Pre-

majority of the students as they, themselves, will realise how they achieved their grades. They might even be ashamed of sharing their grades upon realising that in many cases they do not truly deserve them. This insecurity regarding their achievements might affect their confidence in the future which might further affect their success in their respective fields."

He concludes, "Lastly, this batch will always be labelled as the 'auto pass' batch in the society which is again likely to meddle with a lot of their self-esteem. However, at the end of the day, it all comes down to the individual and how they decide to let this



## Satyajit at 100: *A Guide to the Maestro*

ADHORA AHMED

You might be wondering why I'm guiding you into the world of an already world-renowned filmmaker. There are three reasons. Firstly, because Satyajit Ray's birth centenary is on May 2 of this year, just next week. Secondly, Ray was much more than a filmmaker; he was a writer, illustrator, music composer and more. Thirdly, perhaps you've never had a chance to delve into his vast body of work before, so thank me later for giving you some recommendations.

FILMS

Any discussion about Ray's films is incomplete without mentioning the *Apu Trilogy*, which brought him worldwide acclaim. Hence, if you're new to his filmography, a good starting point could be watching all three films in chronological order: *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajito*, and *Apur Sansar*. Of course, Ray has left behind many other beautiful works of art.

If he were writing this piece, he would probably recommend *Charulata* since it was his favourite work on film. If you're into slow-burning romance full of longing, this adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore's *Nastanirh* will suit you just fine. Like *Charulata*, Ray was adept in making outstanding films about female protagonists. If you want to watch more movies with feminist narratives, then you'll definitely enjoy *Devi* and *Mahanagar*. If you love

complex psychological character studies, *Nayak* will certainly be up your alley.

Apart from feature-length movies, Ray has made a number of documentaries and short films as well. As for documentaries, you might pick the controversial *Sikkim* to learn about the titular Indian state. Among Ray's short films, I highly recommend *Two*, which packs heavy social commentary with no dialogue in only about twelve minutes.

LITERATURE

The wider world is perhaps largely unaware of Ray as an author, but there is no doubt that he is the creator of two of the most enduring characters in Bangla children's literature: Feluda, and Professor Shonku.

If you haven't discovered Feluda's magic already, then dive right in! Allow Feluda and his sidekicks — his cousin Topshe, and his friend, the popular thriller writer Jatayu — to take you along in their adventures. Although Feluda's practice is based in Kolkata, his cases usually take him far beyond the environs of the city, including Kathmandu in *Joto Kando Kathmandute*, and London in *London Feluda*. Most of the stories have been adapted to film and TV. Ray himself adapted *Sonar Kella* and *Joi Baba Felunath* in the seventies.

Let's not forget Ray's foray into science fiction either. Professor Shonku also deals with cases like Feluda, but unlike



the detective, his cases are not firmly rooted in reality. This mad scientist's explorations take him from his abode in Giridih, Jharkhand, to far-flung places that are not necessarily tourist-friendly. For instance, in *Byomjatrir Diary*, Professor Shonku builds a rocket that takes him to Mars. Then, in *Professor Shonku o Roktomatshya Rahasya*, he spends some time underwater to investigate mysterious red fish. As a cat person, Professor

Shonku's pet feline, Newton, is probably one of my favourite fictional cats. Unfortunately, Ray couldn't adapt his fantastical creation on screen during his lifetime. Nonetheless, the power of our imagination is enough to visualise this wonderful creation of his. So, depending on whether you prefer watching or reading, celebrate Satyajit Ray's 100th birth anniversary with one of his timeless works.



# How a Cactus Solved My Hydration Problems

*And can solve yours too!*

**TAZREEN JAHAN BARI**

If we are to keep up with recent health trends, achieve that near-mythical glass skin and not get a pounding headache by the end of the day – we must stay hydrated.

If you observe the health nerds and beauty gurus on social media, you will notice that hydration is the solution to all your problems. But here is the most tragic failure of my life – I cannot seem to stay hydrated. And I know I am not the only one. The apps, alarms, overpriced sippy cups, persistent friends who slide into your DMs only to remind you to drink water are all for nought. All it takes is a prickly blob with attitude issues to get your act together. It is hard to believe, I know. But you have not met Lemon yet.

Let me introduce you to Lemon, my pet cactus who single-handedly solved all my problems by teaching me how to stay hydrated. You never know what might end up inspiring you to make a spontaneous move that ends up changing your life. It can be anything from a lemon flavoured air freshener to lime green toothpaste. Now that I look back, I cannot quite remember which one of these mundane things made me think that to have a young adult life that is sufficiently charming, I must find myself a pet cactus named Lemon. And when my eyes landed on a lime green cactus last summer, I had no idea that this tiny blob of a being has the answer to my ever-lingering hydration issues.

After the initial excitement of having a new pet started to fade, I noticed with no small sense of annoyance that Lemon looked smug, almost gloating whenever I watered him. But this was only the beginning. Every time I failed to get my eight glasses per day, Lemon started mocking me, showing off his hydration capabilities. Because while drinking water once a week is enough for him, I have to guzzle down an entire tank full of water every day to get by. Even without the existence of a raised eyebrow on his blob of a head, the smugness in his attitude was all too visible.

Eventually, I decided to free myself from the scrutiny of a tiny cactus of all things by practising the art of hydration. Yes, I was indeed mocked into submission. But that is beside the point because this is when I finally realised Lemon's true intentions. He was challenging me to stay hydrated by taunting me! Because of Lemon, today I can proudly say that I am a woman free from the clutches of dehydration.

So, what are you waiting for? Get yourself a cactus and solve your drinking (not enough water) problem once and for all! Conquer your headaches and let that healthy glow of your skin burn the haters down. As a parting gift, here is a word of wisdom: do not let a prickly blob get the best of you.

*Tazreen is trying to outwit her judgemental cactus, Lemon, in the game of hydration. Tell her she is delusional at tazreenzahan@gmail.com*



# Detox Drinks and All the Hype

**ELORA MAJUMDER**

The basic concept of a detox and cleanse is the same: to rid the body of accumulated toxins and chemicals for better health overall. That seems safe enough, so why are people as suspicious of it as nosy neighbours are of your love life?

Our body is very complex and adept in understanding what's happening within. Marketed detox and cleansing products often may raise an alarm. Our organs and immune system are naturally capable of ridding our body of unwanted toxins. The barrier may be that our current lifestyle and food habits can cause certain bodily processes to slow down, or make these vital organs work harder than they need to.

## THE FACTS

There is little scientific evidence to support claims that detox drinks can help remove toxins from the body. However, a detox drink may be a healthful snack if it contains plenty of fruits, vegetables, nuts, and seeds. A diet rich in fruits, vegetables, healthful proteins, fats, and fibrous carbohydrates promotes the natural detoxification system in the body and creates overall balance.

Detox drinks may boost health, aid in weight loss, and support the body's natural detoxification processes, but this is different from medical detoxification.

Detoxification has significance in medical science and doctors will often recommend it to people who are coping with substance abuse. It refers to the medically supported management of a person experiencing acute intoxication.

An article in the *Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics* notes that some studies show that commercially available detox diets may improve the way a person's liver

removes toxins from their body. However, the article also highlights that these studies had flawed methodologies and small sample sizes. It also says that a detox diet may help a person lose weight, but only because the diet is low in calories.

## THE HOW-TO

With all the festivals throughout the year, our appetite makes us indulge in guilty pleasures and eat plates full of unhealthy food. The aftermath is usually indigestion, acidity and what not.

The butter cookies, roast chicken, pudding, and extra helpings of your grandma's banana flambé are all threatening to make you gain a few pounds. A balanced detox diet is the answer to all these problems. If our binge lasts for seven days, so should our detox. We cannot expect to flush all the toxins out in a day. Another thing to keep in mind is that food alone can't do the trick. Adequate sleep and working out are as important as eating healthy.

An efficient detox is one that focuses on ailments to protect and supercharge organ health. This can involve cutting out or down on "toxins" like refined sugar, packaged foods, and copious amounts of caffeine that can derail our natural detoxing. Replacing those guilty pleasures with some temporary diet restrictions, a spoonful of herbal concoctions and green juices is the key!

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ILLUSTRATION: RIDWAN NOOR NAFIS

# MEETING MARIA

## ANUPOMA JOYEETA JOYEE

The bottles clanked. I hadn't met her in years. But I was no longer able to take what was happening to me. And so, I gathered the courage and asked Maria for the meeting.

This arrangement was meant to take the edge off. She chose something light for the occasion, but knowing the context of our meeting, I knew how much she must have thought about it. I was fine with, you know, whatever. Her existence neither made me happy nor sad. There were not two adjectives that I would ever use to describe my feelings towards Maria. She just was, she simply existed, albeit against great odds.

I never know how to begin talking about a crucial issue, obviously less so when it is life or death. There were only two people I could explain this to. One of them lived many hours' journey away (or so I thought), so I settled for Maria, my long-stranged friend.

I found the fact that there were only the two of us too revealing. I felt like if there was less sound to absorb her thoughts, she would see right through me. Undivided attention is burdensome.

"So, what brings you here?" she asked, and I hated how strong she was coming on already.

"I'm sure you know the answer to that," I said. I really thought she knew it or at least she would be able to guess. "I don't think I need to beat around the bush anymore. I saw it, you know. Five days ago,

before going to sleep."

"Wow! Are you sure?" she asked. I hated her tone. But Maria was not known to be insincere, especially in moments like this. So, I reassured her, I was sure I had a vision.

A look of great satisfaction swept Maria's face. From where she was in life right then, that was possibly the best news anyone could have given her.

"So, what are you going to do now?" Maria asked but she tried to keep the poker face on. I reciprocated her stunt; I had thought about this encounter for five days. While I hadn't lost much sleep over it, I definitely had all the possible scenarios covered in my head.

"I am sure everything will be fine," I said. When I was younger, if I ever said something that bordered on being ominous or worrying, adults would always tell me, "No! Don't say that, it will all be fine." Basically, they tell you always to manifest the best. Also, I did truly believe everything would be fine. They stopped hunting the *Tellers* long, long ago.

Maria looked a bit disappointed. The fact that I was so sure it would be all okay probably felt cruel to her, more than anything else.

"Do you know how long I have waited for this?" she could no longer keep it together. Maria used to be a *Teller*. She started out in 2196. Divination had been banned for about two decades by then. Maria's group was one of the insurgents.

But they were growing too fast and too loud. A lot of people were dying to annul

the painful prophecies about their lives. It was anarchy. The Handlers got to everyone in their group one by one. I always knew Maria was not brave. If it came to it, she would never be able to take the *Tablet*. Six out of eight people in her group took it. Maria was a coward and Romy was disloyal to their group's ideology. Romy successfully fled the *Territory*, or she would have also been kept in there with Maria.

When they captured Maria, she knew it was going to be a sentence more painful than death. She would have preferred dying but only she wasn't brave enough. Also, from what I knew of her, she loved living. She loved being an early bird and she loved being a night owl. There was positively no one else I knew who had ever wanted to be alive more than she. But at what cost? She was sentenced to solitary confinement for life. Well, she was only ever going to be allowed one meeting. One meeting, with any person. Then never again.

When I called the Handlers to let Maria know that I wanted to meet her, I knew what a momentous decision that would be for her. I asked to be her one meeting.

"I'm sorry about your mom," I suddenly remembered to take this opportunity to show her some empathy. "I think you should have met her. Why didn't you?" I asked.

"She never asked. I think she did not want to put me through this decision. She wanted me to have this one thing to look forward to," she said.

"How does it feel?" I asked.

"Lonely. You know I can't *see* in here, right? It is a Platinum Grade facility, it must have cost billions to make it. Must have been in the news, right?" she was curious.

I didn't have the heart to tell her that I always avoided news about her or Romy. All I knew was that she was captured, and Romy was not found anywhere in our *Territory*.

"Maria, why did you agree to meet me?" I hoped that hadn't come off as hurtful. She never had a lot of friends growing up.

"I agreed because I knew you were telling the truth when you called the Handlers," she said, smiling.

"I thought you couldn't *see* in here?" I asked.

"No, but the last vision I had before I was captured was of us growing old together," Maria said. The guilt was so obvious on her face. But so was her happiness. She must have known someday she would have a friend come in here. I can't imagine the height of anticipation she has had to live through every day for the last 11 years.

\*\*\*

The meeting was over. When I left Maria, she was ecstatic, for obvious reasons. Her confinement would be no longer solitary.

I signed the note to my dad and took a handful of pills. Only death annuls a prophecy.

*Anupoma Joyeeta Joyee is trying to get out of her longlasting reader's block. Send her tips at anupomajoyee@gmail.com*



# Uncharted territories, uncertain futures

## HSC 2020 students face tough ask

**AYSHA ZAHEEN**

On March 22, 2020, the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) exam was announced as postponed due to Covid-19. This ensued a series of more delays and taxing uncertainty on the students' part. Many resumed preparing for their HSC exams and started preparing for admission tests simultaneously, many could only find it within themselves to handle the stress that comes with the former.

After almost 10 months, on January 30, 2021, the students finally received their results based on their academic records. A total of 161,807 students, 11.83 percent of the HSC examinees, received the top score. Due to the number having tripled from the preceding year, students were jeered at and rebuked despite many of them, who had achieved GPA 5 in their JSC and SSC, having failed to get the top score this time. Whilst such an announcement had brought around long-awaited relief, it also raised concerns about university admissions. Now, most of these students have either already gotten into a private university so as not to further delay their education or to prepare for the admissions tests.

"For a while, I could avoid worrying about university. Whilst the good grade made me feel better, I also started feeling extremely worried about university," states Upoma Biswas\*, a student from Bir Shreshtha Noor Mohammad Public College. She noted that it was extremely stressful, and she really thought no other solution but that of getting into a private university could help. Now, she is majoring in Anthropology in Brac University, a subject she was always interested in.

Mariya Marjanah of Independent

University, Bangladesh (IUB) had similar concerns. "The uncertainty for eight long months led me to depression and anxiety. I just wanted to be occupied with things. Truth be told, I was not looking to get into a public university anyway, so when I got the opportunity, I got into IUB," she says.

Whilst many wanted to rid themselves of the unreasonable anxiety, students like Tahmina Khan\*, a student at Brac University majoring in economics, were more concerned about graduating in time, stating that in the midst of the pandemic she felt like it would be better to graduate earlier. Others felt private universities can be just as good as public universities and decided to not waste their time in an uncertain quest.

Were parents supportive of their decision of going to a private university? Zubaida Zahid Runee, first-year Computer Science and Engineering student at North South University responds, "They were supportive after a bit of convincing. The idea of studying at a private university is not very welcome to the older generation of our country. I was able to convince my parents saying that in the long run being in a private university will actually be advantageous to me."

Given it is their first online semester, some of them noted apprehension in handling the pressure. Tahmina says, "Longer hours on the screen cause intense headache and you don't really get to know your peers. Teachers have been helpful but I still feel extremely overwhelmed. There really is no alternative to in-class learning."

However, students like Zubaida feel education in the current format is a bit more organised despite there being a lack of human interactions.

Mariya comments, "Even though I am



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missing out on a lot, I am still enjoying my university lessons." She also noted that the teachers should responsibly hold regular online classes and pay close attention to their students. Another student noted that viva voce examinations were not helpful and mentioned it would further enrich their knowledge if they were given assignments instead.

While the students who have gotten enrolled have been coping with a very new format of education, those who await admission tests to get into public university are struggling to make things work for an examination that is very often dubbed as the "most important of all".

Asif Rahman\* completed his HSC from Cantonment English School and College, Chattogram. About the need to prepare for admission tests, he says, "Well, family opinions and their expectations sure did matter in this decision. But it wasn't too much of a pressure as the degree would help me to either land a good job or to do my post-graduation abroad."

Naima Rahim\*, from Mohammadpur Preparatory School and College, says that despite her parents having played a role in her decision, she also dreams of attending a public university, "I suppose it is something I grew up with. Other than one or two specific ones, I really won't mind majoring in any subject, as long as it's the University of Dhaka. Although, studying online is really taxing, I think it will be worth it!"

Tasnim Ferdousi Mim finished her HSC from Adamjee Cantonment College. She noted similar apprehension in regards to preparing online, "Yes absolutely, ours is a cursed admission batch. Sitting at home for a year has taken away from my mental zeal toward education. I hate online classes; I feel like I can't absorb what's being taught. I can't seek help from my peers or teachers with an academic problem at hand. It's all a disaster."

The students preparing for admission tests were split when asked if they thought parents and instructors could help in this hour of crisis. Whilst some of them had already been unconditionally supported by their parents, others felt like this situation could be tended to by nothing, regarding which, Naima said, "Only reverting to normalcy can help us, nothing else!"

When asked if they had any words of encouragement for their peers, Nazneen Islam\* of Cantonment English School and College, Chattogram said, "It's okay if you can't fulfill your parents' expectations. You are your own person so think about your happiness first. It's also okay if you don't get into a public university, life doesn't end here. Best of luck!"

\*Names have been changed for privacy.



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