

# The Fantasy of an Empty Dhaka



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ONE recurring discourse in Dhaka, especially before and after Eid holidays, is that of an “empty” city. From newspaper headlines and advertisements to personal posts on social media, this invocation of an unpeopled or rather uncrowded city seems ubiquitous, one pushed by both those who leave and those who stay back.

The famous jingle of Grameenphone—“shopno jabe bari amar” (“My dreams will go home”)—captures the emotions of homegoers pretty well. No wonder it has struck a chord with them, becoming a popular score accompanying narratives and photos of their long journey home. The song traces the “journey” of a dream that necessitates dislocation in the first place. It also depicts the dreamer’s emotions of being pulled apart from their loved ones and familiar world, after having arrived in an alien, faraway city, and the joy of eventually going back, made more intense by an excruciatingly long wait. This great exodus is represented as a necessary experience, tinged with the hope of going “back” to their roots from the temporary sojourn, i.e. the city, a location which in turn bears the ring of an unfamiliar, if not outright hostile, terrain. Hence, being away from it is rejuvenating and the journey back worthwhile. The unbound happiness perceived in the homegoers also implies a release—from everything antagonistic that this city has come to be associated with.

What intrigues me most, however, is the second part of the discourse related to those who stay behind. Despite the ominous vibes that being left behind usually ignites, they are actually the happier lot here, jubilant at the prospects of an empty city, left to them only. While one group leaves it, the other relishes the unusual desert—or non-city—that Dhaka



would become because of the former’s departure.

This pleasure of having the city to oneself, albeit temporarily, warrants some consideration. Why are they happy to be left alone? What is a city without its crowd? Do they really want an abandoned city with half its population gone? This celebration of the *phaka* Dhaka is as empty a rhetoric as the phantasmagoria of the barrenness itself. In this waltz with the city, its citizens will continue to ebb and tide, their constant dislocation aestheticised in the form of dreams that no one has any real intention to decipher or even to engage with critically.

Simply put, what this means is that most of us do not have the prospects of a good job, standard schools for children, and places to nurture our dreams outside the capital—which happens to be a primate city in terms of its lopsided

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magnitude and economic, cultural, and political significance compared to other cities of the country. Hence, chasing one’s dreams necessarily involves a dislocation which, like any dislocation, has consequences. Despite the impression of a happy homecoming, there is nothing desirable about this seasonal departure. Let’s not forget that the people leaving the city constitute half of its population, and the “home” referred to is tangible elsewhere. They have all flocked to Dhaka to pursue their dreams. They have a strategic relationship with this city. The city in turn needs them for its service sector to function. If Dhaka doesn’t feature in their emotional graph to yield a mutually fostering relationship, can you blame them?

Most importantly, what this biannual pilgrimage nurtures is a sense of us vs. them, which is detrimental to the

wellbeing of the city. The fantasy of a *phaka* Dhaka is a manifestation of an unhealthy pleasure we partake in at the expense of those we have marked as not-us. The reiteration of this rhetoric solidifies this fissure. When a city is liveable for a span of only seven to 10 days, and that too after sending half its population away, it suggests that something is rotten in its state of being. We need to ask what made this experience—this living away from one’s home, tangibly present and accessible yet unliveable due to lack of resources—a standard experience here. Most importantly, we need to remind ourselves that it doesn’t have to be so! Dhaka’s status as the primary node in all networks has only grown stronger over the years. Hence, coming to Dhaka is not a choice, but a necessity. Both popular and official narratives of the city help buttress this image of the city as the most desired place to be.

Sara Ahmed’s reading of emotion as relational and social comes to mind. In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, she says that our emotion towards something belongs to a general economy of feelings where they circulate in a cultural setting giving certain thing a certain meaning. Following Ahmed, the emotions we have created for Dhaka, with those big epithets and attributions, have relentlessly contributed to the creation of certain relations of “towardness” (to borrow Ahmed’s words), and worse, we have then allowed them to fester. Who needs a primate city anyway? It’s a problem and not a medal to boast of! On the contrary, some feelings of “awayness” (again Ahmed’s term) from Dhaka was in order, for its own good! We better start dispersing the resources outside the capital, and help create emotions in a reverse relation.

As long as we cherish the few days of easy mobility, fresh air, and available public transport without probing its hollowness, it means we have no means or intention of having our problems solved. Thus, the fantasy of a *phaka* Dhaka is a syndrome of things not right, and we better stop fetishising it.

# Politics of School Examinations

SHAHIDUL ISLAM and JOHN RICHARDS

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IN 2009, the government introduced the Primary Education Completion Examination (PECE), a mandatory test for grade 5 students to certify completion of the primary cycle. PECE results marked a dramatic increase in the completion rate. By mid-2000s, enrolment rates in Bangladesh were above 90 percent but, prior to 2009, many children dropped out, and the completion rate was only about 50 percent. By 2015, completion reached about 80 percent, where it has remained since. Among students who attend the PECE, over 95 percent achieve at least a basic pass.

If we stop here, it may seem as if Bangladesh has achieved near-universal primary education. But what does an 80 percent completion rate, or 95 percent PECE pass rate, mean in terms of learning?

One source of evidence is a 2015 study undertaken by Nath and colleagues, who expressed concern that PECE is making primary school too “exam-centric”. Teachers are “teaching to the test”. Parents have increased payments for private tutoring, usually undertaken by the students’ teachers. In the study’s survey, the average expenditure per student on PECE-related activities was over Tk 8,000. Most of it was spent on private tutoring. Other major expenditures were for school-organised

coaching and PECE guide books.

Another source of evidence arises from the World Bank’s simple “learning poverty” index. The index estimates the share of children aged 10-14 who cannot read at a basic level. The index is calculated as the sum of two groups: 1) children out of school assumed unable to read; and 2) children in school at grade 5 but unable to read at a basic level. In Bangladesh, about 20 out of 100 children aged 10-14 are not attending school. Among the 80 children attending school, about half are able to read at a basic level. Overall, in Bangladesh, the estimated “learning poor” are 58 percent of the total. The percentages of learning poor in India are 55 percent and in Pakistan 75 percent. By contrast, in Sri Lanka, only 15 percent are learning poor.

The implication of the learning poverty index is depressing: many children achieve a PECE pass rate but cannot read. Sceptics may argue that the learning poor index is inaccurate. A check on the index is the National Student Assessment (NSA), a survey conducted by the Directorate of Primary Education every two years. This survey assesses large samples of children in primary school on their ability to read Bangla and do basic arithmetic. Unfortunately, the results prior to 2009 are not comparable with more recent results. The surveys conducted in the 2010s are comparable and show only minor change from 2011 forward. For example, in the 2017 NSA survey, 56 percent of students in grade 5 were at the

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“basic” or “below basic” level. The NSA definition of “basic” is that students “can read some grade-appropriate words and short, easy sentences with hesitation and errors; can read aloud a grade-appropriate text slowly and with errors.” The NSA defined the “desirable” level to be students above basic in both reading Bangla and mathematics. Obviously, the NSA did not assess children out of school. The more-or-less equivalent “learning poor” estimate based on the NSA result is 65 percent.

Clearly, learning has never been a top government priority in Bangladesh or elsewhere in South Asia (other than in Sri Lanka and a few Indian states). Political leaders focus on school enrolment, the number of teachers recruited and schools constructed, and the free textbooks printed and distributed. But requiring students to spend five years in primary school and not acquire the foundational skills of reading and mathematics is a betrayal of the children and their families. A business-as-usual approach will not solve our learning crisis, which was compounded by the long Covid-induced school closure. A learning recovery and remedial approach to help students acquire the essential foundational skills was thus essential even before the pandemic—it has become more urgent now.

The good news is that politicians, if they place high emphasis on school learning outcomes, can make significant improvements, even in neighbourhoods

where children’s families have few books and many parents are illiterate. For example, in India, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has governed the state of Delhi for nearly a decade. In recent years, secondary school results in government schools there have exceeded private school results, which was unthinkable a decade earlier.

The government of Bangladesh should, therefore, take effective measures to ensure that all children have enough interesting books to read, that children are encouraged to read, and that the schools are clean. A supply of textbooks and clean schools alone are not enough. Teachers play a crucial role. They should be well-trained and able to promote learning. They should not serve as “vote banks” at times of elections. Also, the current time-on-task in primary school is not enough. Adding more teaching time may be politically sensitive, but improvements require a convergence of priorities among the major groups involved including politicians, education officials, teachers, and parents.

In a recent press conference, the state minister for primary and mass education was unable to say whether they would abandon PECE this year. He concluded by saying they would revisit the plan later. This indecisiveness does not help. Perhaps, they do not have the power to scrap the PECE yet. But it’s important that we acknowledge the importance of overcoming the learning loss caused in the past two years.

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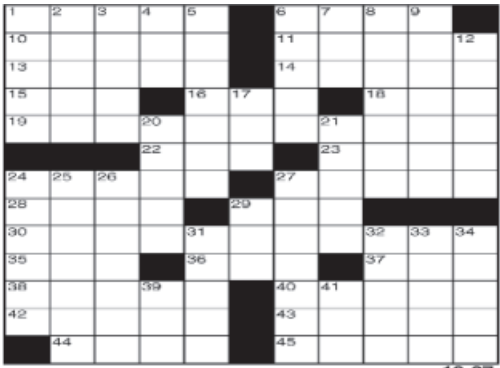
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