

How students outside Dhaka miss out on opportunities

NOUSHIN NURI

As much as we rant about how unliveable Dhaka city may be, most of us would blink in disbelief at the thought of having to move out. We are tied to this city — by obligations and attachments alike. Dhaka is so dense with opportunities that the opportunity cost of living outside it is disproportionately high. Take this from someone who has been incurring this cost for two decades.

I was doing a public speaking competition in 2018. While my competitors had to only think about preparing themselves, I had the extra headache of having to travel to Dhaka and arrange accommodation.

Despite the circumstances, I had been on the luckier side. I could at least attend the event. My parents always went out of their ways to support my extracurricular activities. This has not been the case for most of my peers living in Chattogram.

Days in school were pretty uneventful. Annual sports were held every winter. The only other competitions I remember are Olympiads and the Spelling Bee. These initiatives pooled participants from each district and then gradually funnelled them into the latter rounds, ensuring geographical inclusivity. Most other competitions made no significant effort to go beyond Dhaka.

The discrepancy was uncomfortably stark for Fahim Abrar Chowdhury, who had shifted to Chattogram after studying in Dhaka up to grade five. He recounted his days in Dhaka, where he was a member of his school's debate club. Their science club used to organise the biggest national science fair and other clubs kept the campus lively throughout the year.

"Shifting to Chattogram in class 6 felt like a drastic change," said Fahim. "ECAs mostly consisted of sports. The number of students interested in activities other than sports was very low and the institution did next to nothing to nurture the participants. There were no workshops for the debaters, in fact, there wasn't even a proper debate club until our time."

Most of my friends in Chattogram were completely deprived of such activities, as there is simply not much happening outside Dhaka.

Dhaka-centrism is a problem in almost all sectors in Bangladesh. But this discrepancy, especially when young people are involved, can run deeper to an unfair extent. It sets the stage for a gap that keeps widening over the years. Given the competitiveness drilled into our education and job sectors, people outside Dhaka are bound to have a hard time.

The harshest display of non-Dhaka residents having to walk the extra mile is during university admission when

the stakes are much higher. Given the tremendous social pressure to get into a good university, many consider temporarily shifting to Dhaka for coaching. The trade-off is a tricky one — the proximity of good coaching institutions versus the convenience of taking preparation from the comfort of one's home. Either way, people outside Dhaka are forced to com-

a business school in Dhaka, she didn't find anyone from her school, or even her town, Sylhet. "Most of the students in Sylhet don't want to go beyond medical and engineering," Ipshita said. Networking didn't happen as effortlessly for her as it did for most of her Dhaka-residing peers.

Having to move out of Dhaka after growing up there has its challenges, too.

I faced similar problems during my semester break. When the academic pressure finally let up and I felt like I had time to do other things, I was left with not many things to do because I went back home in Chattogram. Having to stay back in Dhaka — away from home even during semester breaks — to continue my part-time job seemed like stretching it too



PHOTOS: ORCHID CHAKMA

Fariha Sadek moved to Rajshahi to pursue her undergrad at Rajshahi University. The scarcity of opportunities makes her come back to Dhaka again and again, often at great inconvenience. For a case competition, she had to stay in the capital for thirteen consecutive days. The cost of doing one such competition is lost class attendance marks, missed content covered in those classes, with any possible quizzes or presentations held during that timeline. But the cost of living outside Dhaka doesn't end there.

"I tried to get a part-time job but couldn't because of my location disadvantage. Even organisations that allow remote work require employees at the office at least once a week," said Fariha.

far. So, I took a break from work during a period when I actually had ample time to dedicate to it. Though I had a very good time with my family at home, I sort of felt like I was missing out. This wouldn't have happened had there been similar opportunities in my hometown too.

Thus, Dhaka keeps pulling us towards it. We have so many strings attached that being far gives a feeling of being detached or even abandoned. The missed opportunities become ghosts and haunt us. As a result, we make it a lifestyle to live with the constant fear of missing out.

Noushin Nuri is an early bird fighting the world to maintain her sleep schedule. She is on Instagram as @noushinmuri

The role of privilege in SUCCESSFUL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

TAZREEN JAHAN BARI & FABIHA AFIFA

From Nike's "Just Do It" to Samsung's "Do what you can't", capitalism has constantly told us we are the masters of our destiny in a free market. Whatever we set our minds on will surely work out, and if it doesn't, we just didn't try hard enough. Or, as Kim Kardashian infamously said, "Nobody wants to

Competition 2021.

"It was a fairly normal upbringing; I had supportive but strict parents and they encouraged me to pursue my ambitions. Nothing was forced upon. No one from my family was big in the business scene either," she says.

What came to Wazed's aid is her stellar education and working experience. Having achieved good grades

not need."

Even banks won't lend money to someone for business if you do not have a certain amount to begin with. Tamzid says, "One of the major problems I faced while trying to make my business work is capital. I did not have enough capital to begin with. Banks are also reluctant to give out loans to anyone who does not have any assets or money to their name."

The financial risk associated with business is therefore exactly what stops people who are in a more financially vulnerable position to go after their dream of becoming an entrepreneur.

Going back to Afer Porshia, the owner of Nazakat, she says, "Whoever wants to be on this platform to do business must tend to take any kind of risks, as anything can happen at any time. Also, there must be a financial backup."

When you hear about Saria Saguardo Bibi, a journalist/advertisement agency executive who went to Le Cordon Bleu London and became a bakery shop owner in a location like Gulshan, the



DESIGN: AAQIB HASIB

work anymore." Privilege and its consequent perks for some people's careers were rarely talked about until the past few years. Although the discussion is more commonly seen involving pop culture and entertainment industries across the globe (think of Lily-Rose Depp, the Kar Jenner family or prominent Bollywood dynasties), the concept of privilege is very prevalent in the world of business as well.

It seems only logical to assume that studying at the right college, knowing the right people or having the right bank balance from the get-go will tip the scales in favour of some entrepreneurs over others.

To better understand how the Bangladeshi entrepreneurship scene in particular is swayed by privilege or lack thereof, we interviewed some successful Bangladeshi entrepreneurs from different industries and saw the business sector from their point of view.

One of the first lotteries of luck that we are played in life is the family we are born into. Afer Porshia, founder and owner of the clothing brand Nazakat, got the longer end of the stick in this regard as her father is the owner of a successful clothing store. Being allowed into the backstage of the world of apparel business through her father inspired her to go into business as well.

For Shabnam Nida Wazed, on the other hand, her familial background had little to do with her current position in the sphere of entrepreneurship. Wazed is the founder and CEO of AGAM International, a UK-based Fin-Tech company operating in Bangladesh to eradicate financial inequity in the country's current banking system. Her work has earned her several international accolades, including the Joint Winner position at the Global Fintech

throughout school, she went to England to pursue her LLB from Bristol Law School at the University of the West of England, Bristol, with a full free scholarship from Lord Templeman.

Upon completion of her second master's in Emerging Economics from King's College London, she joined a UK-India financial services firm Geosansar, and quickly became the Country Head of Bangladesh. Soon after, her own company, AGAM International, was born. Today her company's board includes her mentors from King's as well as Geosansar.

What Wazed implies about her connections, though, is that they are a byproduct of her work ethic and networking abilities, not opportunities that fell into her lap without trying. As for the career and financial risks she took for her business, Wazed was aware of the danger but not discouraged.

This leap of faith is harder to take for someone who has a family that depends on them or debts they need to resolve. Mohammad Raiyan Tamzid, founder and owner of a popular restaurant Callisto in Rajshahi, says, "During Covid-19, I used my first three month's profit to pay my employees for 6 months. I could only do that because I did not need to depend on that profit to take care of my family as I started this business out of passion,



meet while her friends went about pursuing university degrees. Later down the line, she got into ULAB and could only do that because they were offering 40 percent off for older students at that time.

Thankfully, after her graduation, she got a job, saved up and had friends and family help chip in when it came to going abroad to study and also later when she bought her first studio. The financial risks Saria took to make her dream a reality were not small in any way. But Saria is a firm believer of "The only thing you need to fear in life is the fact that you can do anything and be anyone you want."

Privilege does not always come in the form of being born into a rich family or having an inheritance to lean on for capital. It can be anything from having an expensive degree, having a family business that allowed you to learn how this world works, having a safety net that allows you to take a leap of faith, having a presence in social media that allows you to have loyal followers and exposure, having friends who believe in you and are happy to help you in need, or even not having to take anyone's responsibility but yours.

When you recognise privilege and its many forms, it becomes easier to understand that despite the hard work that any successful individual puts into their craft, a lot still depends on luck!