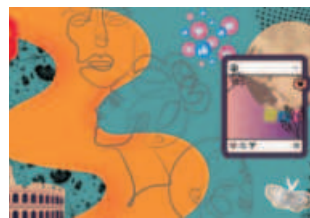


THE DEFINITIVE
YOUTH
MAGAZINE
SHOUT

DHAKA THURSDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2023, FALGUN 10, 1429 BS

A PUBLICATION OF The Daily Star

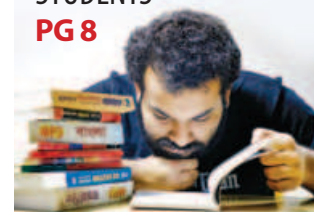


WHAT IT MEANS TO
BE CULTURED

PG 3

THE BCS OBSESSION
OF PUBLIC UNIVERSITY
STUDENTS

PG 8



THE WAY WE ARE TAUGHT BANGLA

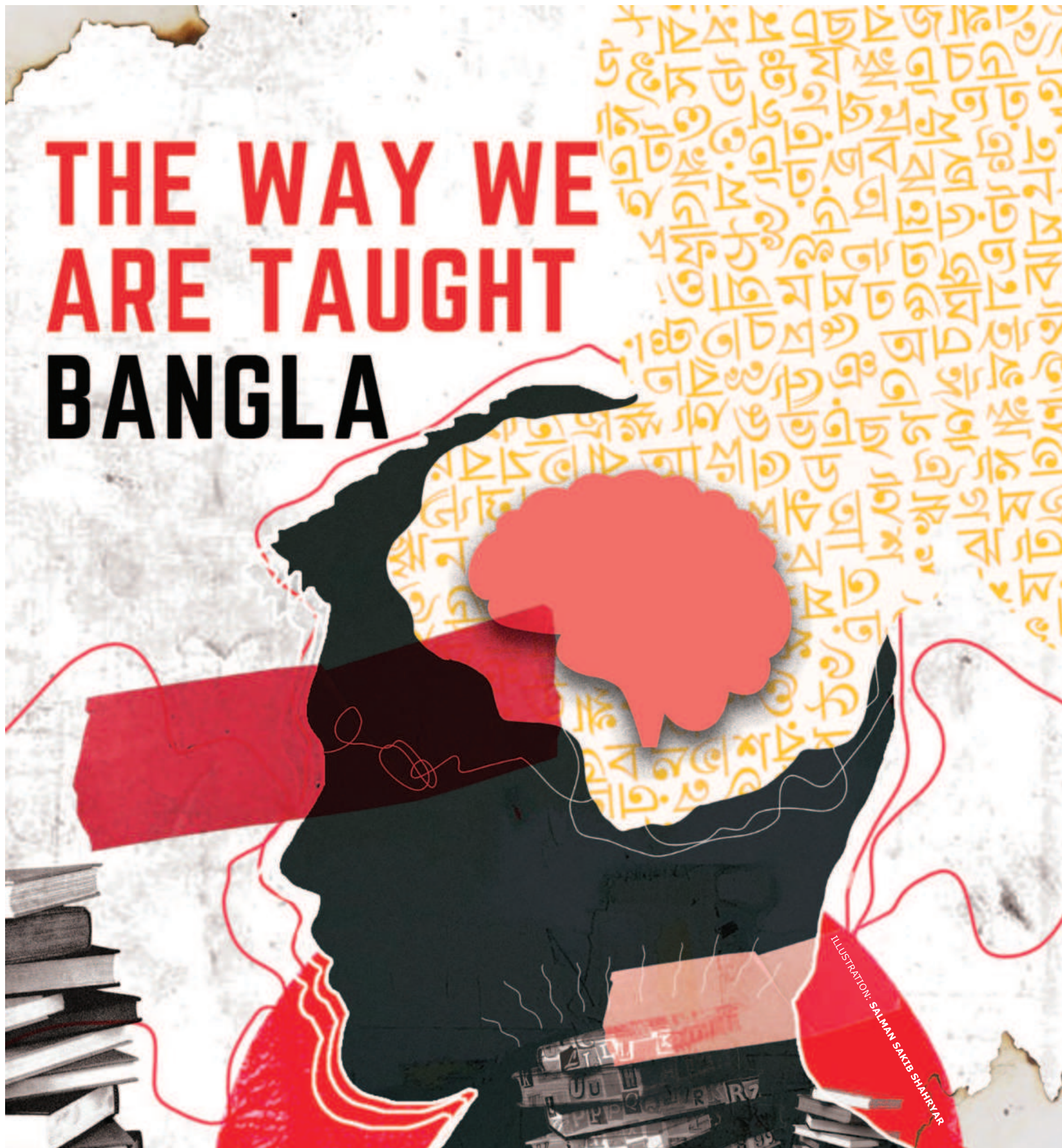


ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHARIYAR

EDITORIAL

I normally try hard to avoid paying attention to Dhaka University (DU), where I had the [mis]fortune to study for five years, let alone ask other people to pay attention to it. But recent developments compel me to break my personal rule. Rabindranath Tagore came to my campus and he is in distress.

The entire situation is steeped in thick layers of irony. A sculpture of the great poet was erected as a statement for freedom of speech, with his mouth taped off and a bleeding nail hammered through a copy of the *Geetanjali* in his hands. However, university authorities dismantled the sculpture overnight, and parts of it were strewn throughout campus. The latest news when this piece was being written is that some students recovered the damaged head and other parts to erect the sculpture again, with Tagore's head inclined to the left this time, in supposed protest.

Understanding Bangladesh's politics, and how students constantly shape it with their voice and activism is a difficult prospect. The recent events at DU does a good job encapsulating it all. The fact that it's happening in February just adds to the irony.

– Azmin Azran, Editor, SHOUT



TITLE OF YOUR MIXTAPE



A

Love To Lose
Sandro Cavazza

Bésame Mucho
Andrea Bocelli

mother tongue
Bring Me The Horizon

Rirongsha
Karnival

B

Speak In Tongues
machineheart

We Don't Talk Anymore
Charlie Puth ft. Selena Gomez

Agust D'
Agust D'

Serotonin
Mansieve ft. Namira Z & Faizan Ahmed

Email us at shoutds@gmail.com
with feedback, comments, and reader
submissions within 500 words.

PLAYWATCH

BOOKS



DESIGN: ABIR HOSSAIN

Five books to help you delve into the world of Bangla literature

ZABIN TAZRIN NASHITA

We grew up speaking and hearing Bangla and yet, we sometimes find it difficult to get past some of our renowned literary works, having to resort to the *Bangla Ovidhan* on nearly every word.

Exaggerated as this scenario might be, giving up on classic Bangla books because of the dated lexicon is a fairly common phenomenon. However, Bangla works from the 19th and 20th centuries are some of the best bodies of writings in world literature. Therefore, missing out on such gems due to the intricate nature of its language would mean doing yourself a great injustice.

Having established that, here are five books you can try if you're relatively new to Bangla literature.

Putulnacher Itikotha by Manik Bandyopadhyay

This is arguably one of Manik Bandyopadhyay's best works. *Putulnacher Itikotha* is the perfect place to start if your end goal is reading classics with relative ease. The magic of this book is the author's writing style, which uses the formal *Shadhu Bhasha* in verbs and the colloquial Bangla in pronouns. This feature lends his writing gracefulness while providing the comfort of reading.

The novel revolves around a village doctor and expands on the characters around him as well as the complex social relations among them.

Professor Shonku by Satyajit Ray

When we say Satyajit Ray, we think about his amazing films and the widely admired detective Feluda. However, *Professor Shonku* offers humour, comfort, and sci-fi-laced adventure within the diary entries of a brilliant scientist discussing his inventions and his connections with his neighbours, friends, and his feline companion Newton.

Professor Shonku serves well as a light-hearted read, and I highly recommend you get the entire collection.

Srikanta by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay

The premise of Sarat Chandra's works is simple, yet they're capable of invoking powerful emotions within the readers. *Srikanta*, Sarat Chandra's masterpiece, is a partially autobiographical tale of a man living the life of a wanderer. The plot follows his life starting from adolescence, telling tales of his voyages, encounters, and romances.

Sarat Chandra describes *Srikanta* as "a collection of scattered memories, nothing else". This may explain why *Srikanta* feels so close to life.

Golpo Guccho by Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore has many monumental works, but *Golpo Guccho* may be the most beginner-friendly start. It's a collection of Tagore's short stories, a few of which are included in the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) Bangla books. They're generally straightforward and hard-hitting, not to mention the fact that reading short stories is much easier than novels.

The poetic nature of Tagore's writing is sure to win your heart.

Padmarag by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

If you're entirely new to Bangla literature, *Padmarag* might be slightly challenging to read. This is the author's only piece long enough to be recognised as a novel and has utopian essences similar to her widely regarded work *Sultana's Dream*.

Set in the British colonial period, *Padmarag* speaks of several women from diverse backgrounds and religions, who find refuge and purpose in a school and female welfare institution known as *Tarini Bhavan*. *Padmarag* is definitely an essential read if you're into feminist literature and worth a try even if you're not.

Zabin Tazrin Nashita has a pile of unfinished books, yet continues to buy more. Tell her to cut it out at zabintn@gmail.com

Documentary films are more important than you may think

RAIAN ABEDIN

Recently, I managed to watch a screening of *Beyond The Wave*, the story of Nasima Akter – the first Bangladeshi woman surfer. I had very little idea what the movie would even be about, and even though I could tell upon watching it that the film was produced under a strained budget, I remained transfixed by the facts that were laid right in front of me. So much so that later that very night, I spent hours on the internet, trying to learn more about this rather unconventional genre of film and the many ways it has impacted this country, even though for most of its lifespan it has existed in the shadows.

Documentaries have always held the monumentally important, yet frequently overlooked, task of telling stories that already exist. Instead of opting for creating fiction, they prefer the bizarreness of reality. Every year we see more and more filmmakers of all calibres try to make their own documentary films, showcasing truths of the world around them, distilling them down to form a rich story that does not compromise on facts. A lot of this is done with very little funding from producers, and despite it all, documentaries have had a significant global impact as another genre of film. They deserve not



DESIGN: **ABIR HOSSAIN**

just recognition, but to be celebrated for all they have achieved.

From 1971's *Stop Genocide* (Zahir Raihan) to 1989's *Adam Surot* (Tarek Masud) to 2007's *Swapnabhumi* (Tanvir Mokammel) to 2012's *Are You Listening!* (Kamar Ahmed Simon), documentary films in Bangladesh have told vivid stories about communities and events often undermined by most other media. The stories they tell are snapshots of history that pass us by, the incredible events that we often

fail to notice simply because the cultures we live in end up ignoring them. Make no mistake, documentary films may be an unconventional genre, but they deserve to be acknowledged as an art form for telling powerful stories about humankind, no matter their creed or class.

Although these films have made waves in international communities, even winning awards in many cases, they are still heavily underfunded and overlooked as a genre in our country. The reasoning

behind this is simple, since fiction stories can be made to be more entertaining, they have more value as a business. Hence, the Bangladesh Film Development Corporation and television broadcasting channels see no reason to provide funding for documentaries.

Most documentaries that are worth any note are usually completely independent productions or are somehow funded by international welfare organizations. And yes, this does mean that the world of documentary film is also marred with a number of films produced solely for propaganda, but lovers of the craft have again and again taken it upon themselves to use this medium to tell stories they simply cannot tell in fiction.

Of course, even beyond the few names I have mentioned, there are countless more to discover, I myself am still finding out about new documentaries pertaining to stories I didn't even know existed. Even without the help of major funding from any corporation, it is astounding to me how much they have been able to accomplish.

Raian is currently upset at the dust that settles on his computer keyboard. Send him cleaning tips and tricks at IG: @raian_is_burning

What it means to be cultured

RUDAIBA MAHBUB

Let us assume, Hasan, a man in his early fifties, found himself pondering over what his daughter, Pori, could have meant when she used the word "slay" in response to him finally getting his car washed. His daughter had meant no harm. He resorted to the urban dictionary and caught up with the word "slay".

Later that day when his daughter let him know that she finished reading the book he had given him, Hasan replied with not only a "slay" but a "slay girl". His daughter, stunned, replied, "Wow, Baba you have become cultured!"

So, Hasan became "cultured".

Earlier, his daughter had become cultured too. In Hasan's mind, Pori had become cultured when she took upon reading his favourite author, Fyodor Dostoevsky.

They are now both considered cultured by each other, but for very different reasons. While one has mastered the art of using the Gen Z lingo, the other has started their journey into the literary classics. What this actually shows is that being considered cultured is a very subjective matter, depending on the person you are being labelled by.

Pori identifies as an ideal member of the contemporary society and in the contemporary context where culture might be depicted through hints about pop culture or current events. Thus, for Gen Z, culture often consists of the subtle references to pop culture or all that is trending, the things that are widespread on the internet, the memes, and the popular vernacular.

Hasan's views, on the other hand, hint at his preferences in the arts or literature, and he labels people depending on how much they have read or know about literature and the outside world.

While being cultured probably started out as having enough education or knowledge on a subject, these days it has evolved into a much broader idea, mostly referring to individual preferences. We might give definition to it based on our identities, beliefs, hobbies, and social notions we lean towards.

Gamers sometimes consider themselves cultured when compared to people who don't game, gamers might even address others as a "normie". However, even among gamers there are criteria you need to fulfil in order to be considered cultured. It might depend on the genre of the game you are playing or if you are up-

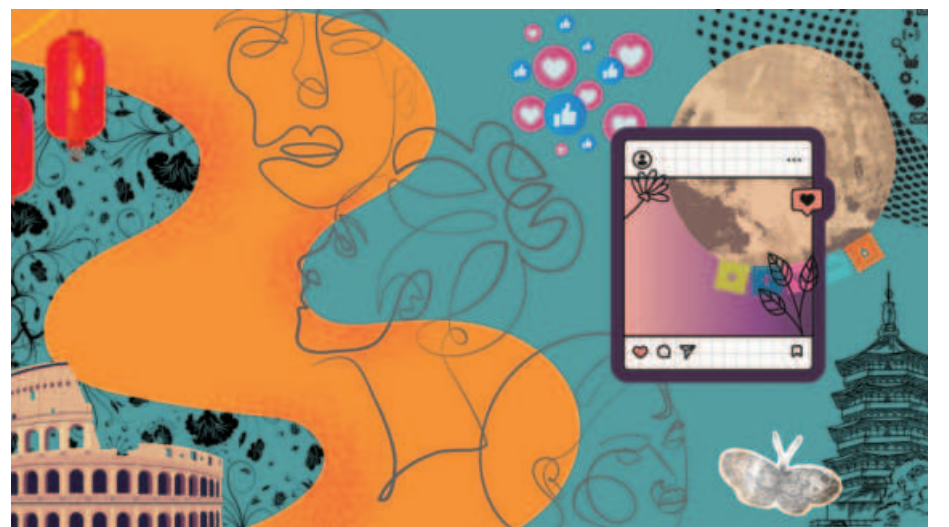


ILLUSTRATION: **SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM**

to-date with the world of gaming.

In music, a metalhead might consider someone who knows the classic metal bands or singers to be cultured. That definition would again not sit right with someone who is into indie music.

Furthermore, we can see in our Bangladeshi context, identifying with the roots and culture of the land, embracing its various cultural sentiments can be con-

sidered being cultured. To some it might mean savouring the traditional *daal bhaat* and *aloo bharta*. For others it may be subscribing to the traditions and festivities.

Ultimately, what we must keep in mind is that the concept of being "cultured" has no objective truth to it, and is completely subjective. Thus, one's own identity and perception is what defines what they view as being cultured.

English Medium students’ strained relationship with Bangla

ADRITA ZAIMA ISLAM

The perception that English Medium students in Bangladesh are incapable of speaking Bangla properly is fairly common. There appears to be a constant grievance amongst the older populace that through their half-baked knowledge of Bangla and their bias towards English, the English Medium students are actively contributing to the degrading authenticity of the Bangla language. While it is a hard pill to swallow, some truth does lie in these sentiments.

The way in which the English Medium curriculum is structured plays a large role in how students perceive and utilise Bangla. An English Medium school, by its very definition, shapes its educational system using English as its primary language. Classes for every subject, except the foreign language courses, are conducted in English. The school authority and the teachers communicate with the students in English and the textbooks and corresponding reading materials are also entirely written in English.

Consequently, there is little room for Bangla and there is an absence of emphasis on its proper learning.

While kindergartens do introduce students to the basics of the Bangla alphabet, it is never placed at the forefront. It is only when students enter the first grade that they get a complete idea of the alphabet. From there onwards, through the primary years of education, the process of learning Bangla progresses at a slower pace.

Up until the fifth grade, most English Medium schools centre their syllabi around the books issued by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB). However, the way that these books are used is not in alignment with the way they are used in Bangla Medium schools. Instead of using the entire book to give the students a wide range of ideas, teachers are more likely to selectively teach parts that they deem absolutely necessary for their pupils’ understanding. Consequently, the students only learn the bare minimum.

Kabita Karmaker, a primary level Bangla teacher at S.F.X. Greenherald International School and lecturer at Archbishop T.A. Ganguly Teachers’ Training College, said, “There is a noticeable lack of encouragement to learn Bangla on your own accord at English Medium schools. Students are rarely asked to read additional books or do supplementary reading. Bangla is definitely not taught in an immersive enough environment.”

As a result, students fall behind in learning Bangla properly from the primary level and things become objectively worse in the subsequent years.

There is a stark difference between the way Bangla is taught at the primary level and at the secondary level. While the primary section is heavily reliant on the NCTB books, as soon as students enter middle school, they are suddenly introduced to the O Level curriculum for Bangla.

From as early as the sixth grade, students are conditioned to learn Bangla in

a way that fits the O Level format. Bidhan Kumar Sen, former O Level Bangla teacher at Oxford International School, reflects, “It has come to my notice that the way we teach Bangla for O Levels inadvertently leads students to think this is just another subject for them to ace. They don’t view it as a language to learn and excel at, even if it’s their mother tongue.”

He further added, “The O Level syllabus in reality makes it more difficult for students to learn the Bangla language.”

Both the Cambridge and Edexcel O Level examinations only include reading and writing modules. One of the papers focuses on the students’ knowledge of a small part of Bangla grammar and their ability to read a passage and answer questions based on said passage. The other paper, which is the writing module, consists of an essay and a letter. Both of these papers are structured in such a way that students don’t need to have in-depth knowledge of the language to do well on the test. Rather, it is entirely possible for one to hack their way through O Level Bangla by memorising the pattern of the exams by heart and learning the bare minimum.

Ironically, French and other foreign languages that are offered as second language courses include listening and speaking modules in addition to the reading and writing modules. The inclusion of these aspects means that students are taught such languages with a more holistic approach, which the Bangla syllabus lacks.

The absence of literature in the curriculum is also a glaring issue. A language is deeply rooted in its corresponding literature. Without a positive understanding of the literature, it can prove to be quite hard to grasp the essence of the language.

“The Bangla curriculum in English Medium schools is geared towards people learning it as a second language and not

their mother tongue,” sums up Shanum Sarkar, an AS Level student at Bangladesh International Tutorial. “This means that a lot of us are not interested in Bangla language and literature at all.”

Moreover, Bangla is only offered during O Levels. A Level students are not able to pursue a further education in Bangla as the course is not offered to begin with.

While it may lie at the crux of this issue, the educational infrastructure is not solely to be blamed here. The mindset of certain English Medium students, their teachers, and parents are also to blame to a certain extent. English Medium schools have the

habit of propagating the idea that model students should, at all times, speak in English. The use of Bangla inside school premises, even when students are communicating amongst themselves, is frowned upon. While this is understandable in and of itself because the goal is to ultimately encourage students to perfect English, the consequences of this are far from innocent.

This practice means individuals within the student body who are weaker in English are looked down upon. If one speaks with too heavy a Bangla accent or resorts to using Bangla entirely, other students tend to develop a negative view of them. It is not uncommon for students to be bullied for these matters either. Even at home, parents are likely to ask their children to try to communicate only in English.

The result of these educational and social discrepancies in the learning and use of Bangla is that a pessimistic view of the language comes to be ingrained in the minds of English Medium students from a very early age. This directly correlates to their inability to master Bangla or even, in many cases, speak it to an acceptable degree.

Zaima is a struggling student, a failed guitarist and a poet in need of better poetic ideas. Send her your sympathies at zaima2004adrta@gmail.com



PHOTOS: ORCHID CHAKRA

The sad state of Bangla literature in the national curriculum

AYAAN SHAMS SIDDIQUEE

Literature exists all around us, in tones and colours that are as varied as whatever meets the eyes and reaches the mind. It exists in little bubbles that are meant to be enjoyed by everyone regardless of their backgrounds. Stories, poems, novels, and plays have passed down traces of culture, identity, and society as a method to preserve the essence of one’s being since time immemorial.

Bangla literature serves that same purpose for us, ornamenting our rich heritage and helping us find our roots. Whether it be Sukumar Ray’s unique brand of humour or Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s aching prose, the depth of Bangla literature can allure anyone willing to delve into a world of vibrancy and glamour.

However, for an overwhelming majority of national curriculum students, literary exploration of this sort is not even a pipe dream, rather something that can be regarded

as mere fantasy.

The reason behind such a situation lies in the very foundation of our national curriculum. The confusions and complications that go hand in hand with it have made studying Bangla literature, out of all the subjects, a woefully difficult task for all parties involved.

Throughout a student’s academic career, Bangla literature entails expectations of memorisation

and internalisation of a myriad of purely fictitious facts with the sole intention of earning marks in exams. As a result, students grow a sense of resentment towards the entire topic, and fail to grasp the true essence of the literature they are presented with.

Our national curriculum’s exam structure is largely at fault for misdirecting the students’ perception of the subject. From sixth grade onwards, creative questions — which have been subject to immense criticism from students, guardians, and professionals alike — plague students and dictate their learning process in a skewed manner.

Shirin Akhter*, a lecturer of Bangla at St. Joseph Higher Secondary School and College, expressed her dissatisfaction at how creative questions derail students when it comes to studying literature.

“The biggest downfall of the creative question system is that it discourages students from thinking critically and analysing literary works from their own perspectives. One must understand that argumentative writing isn’t always supposed to carry a yes/no solution, but creative questions demand that anyways,” she laments.

Her opinions were echoed by Md. Jayed Sany, a second-year student of Bangla at Dhaka University. According to him, the system of creative questions is, undoubtedly, a major hindrance to studies, but in the case of Bangla literature, the trend of multiple-choice questions (MCQs) deteriorates the situation even further.

“By memorising the details in a story — not for personal satisfaction, but out of obligation — students miss out on the novel journey that the authors may have intended for them to experience,” he said. “But since they must attempt MCQs in their exams, our pupils are more concerned with committing the characters’ family trees to heart than they are with gauging the authors’ underlying messages and motifs.” Moreover, the way textbooks are structured doesn’t aid the process of learning either. As it currently stands, students have to study a wide



ILLUSTRATION: SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM

catalogue of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, drama, and excerpts from novels, all of which belong to different genres and feature different authors from various time periods. A lack of correlation between the included sections translates to a lack of comprehension which runs rampant throughout the books, thus making it difficult for students to commit to a particular style of literature.

As an alternative, Shirin suggests, “If the textbooks of each grade featured multiple works from distinct authors and followed a similar style, students could learn to appreciate and dive into literature more easily.”

On the other side of the spectrum, it is worth noting that the English Medium curriculum approaches literature in a fundamentally different manner. English literature, in particular, has a far more comprehensive structure that reiterates the importance of understanding a piece of literary text with logical reasoning.

Tajrian Khan, a high school senior at Mangrove International School, who previously studied under the national curriculum, drew a comparison between the way literature was perceived in both spheres, “Literature studies in the UK curriculum is wholly different from NCIB in the sense that the former demands you to look at works of fiction through a critical lens, thus testing you on your literary and thematic analysis.”

He further added, “You can choose to memorise a novel verbatim, but you might still fail the paper if you aren’t able to form opinions and defend them well enough, since that’s the goal of the subject. For the same reason, all exams are also open-book, saving you the trouble of memorising quotes so you can focus on what’s actually important, unlike the national curriculum.”

At the end of the day, indulging in literary works is a choice that is unique to the ones consuming it. While we cannot dictate the content one should or should not read, it must be ensured that there are no barriers to accessing and enjoying literature, as is the case with our national curriculum.

**Name has been changed for privacy*

Ayaan immerses himself in dinosaur comics and poorly-written manga. Recommend your least favourite reads at ayaan.shams@gmail.com



THE DEFINITIVE YOUTH MAGAZINE SHOUT

Towards a brighter future

A CORRESPONDENT

Fauzia and her daughter Mim, who is now more than four-and-a-half years old, wake up together early in the morning. Fauzia helps Mim pick out an outfit for the day. She lays out the clothes on the bed – a shirt, pants or skirt, socks, and shoes. Mim then gets dressed as her mother helps her with the buttons and zippers. After that, she brushes Mim's hair, ties it back, and helps her put on a bright ribbon.

Fauzia packs a healthy lunch for Mim and the mother-daughter duo leaves their house for the factory where Fauzia works as an operator. After entering the factory gates, Fauzia drops off Mim at the daycare centre, which is inside the factory compound. Then, she heads to her respective station inside the factory for her scheduled duty with her co-workers.

Every day, Fauzia drops off Mim at the daycare centre before starting her shift. Seeing her surrounded by toys, books, and other children helps Fauzia feel relieved knowing that her daughter is in good hands. During her break, Fauzia often sneaks into the daycare centre to check on Mim and give her a kiss and a hug.

With time, Mim has started to thrive at the daycare centre. She has made new friends, learned new things, and is more confident now than before. Watching her daughter grow and flourish in such a manner fills Fauzia with pride and happiness.

Now, Fauzia's daughter gets up before her mother in the morning with the excitement to go to the daycare centre.

Balancing work and motherhood was

initially a challenge for Fauzia. And then, Multifabs Limited stepped in to support her. When the company introduced a comprehensive childcare program, providing safe and affordable childcare services to its employees' children, Fauzia became very happy. Now, she could give Mim better education. Mim too was eager to study hard and had big dreams. With the help of Multifabs' daycare support, Fauzia has now gathered the courage to provide her daughter with the best possible education. The company's childcare support not only gave her the flexibility to focus on her work but also saved her a significant amount of money that she would otherwise have to spend on childcare.

Fauzia is a Bangladeshi RMG worker who works as an operator at Multifabs Limited, a leading garment manufacturer in the country. She has been working there for over a decade and has seen the company grow and provide many benefits to its employees.

"Being at Multifabs Limited has given me the stability to hope for a better future for my daughter and me," said Fauzia with a glimpse of hope in her eyes.

Fauzia's employment at Multifabs Limited has empowered her along with her family in many ways. She has been able to provide her daughter with better education and create a better life for her. The job security and benefits that come

with her employment have given her a sense of pride and purpose. Added to that, later Fauzia's husband and her sister also joined Multifabs Limited as workers.

Fauzia's story is an inspiration to many other working mothers in Bangladesh. She is evidence of the positive impact that companies can have on the lives of their employees and their families. Through her employment at Multifabs Limited, Fauzia and her daughter Mim have been given the opportunities they deserve and a brighter future to look forward to.

Multifabs Limited is a renowned export-oriented RMG factory operating in Bangladesh for more than 30 years. The company has over 10,000 employees and workers, and has been always looking after them by providing various types of benefits. The daycare centre and school have been operational for more than 15 years and every year, 30 children get admitted there.

After the children are done with their learning at the daycare within two years, the company takes full responsibility for their admission to a better school.

Along with supporting the employees and workers in different ways, Multifabs Limited also aims to convert 50 percent of its energy generation from solar power by 2030.

The goal of Multifabs Limited's management is to create better lives. There are hundreds of mothers like Fauzia under their employment who can now look forward to a better future, thanks to the company's corporate wellness initiatives.



PHOTOS: COURTESY



Jhalmuri for the hollowed in-between

FATIUL HUQ SUJOY

"To what do I owe today's melancholy call?"

"There's talks of a dive tonight, in the hollows."

"Ah. And you're obviously staying put, safe in your room, miles away from the mines?"

The jhalmuri mama handed Troity her jhalmuri in a paper cone with a square card on top as a spoon.

"Extra ghugni, no chilis," he confirmed, his cyber-enhanced eyes ever judging. Troity nodded, transferred the credits and headed towards the gate. Even from her vantage through narrow alleys a hundred strides off, the gate towered like a monstrosity in silence. Enormous slabs, of iron and wood, sat closed and plastered against the rocky cliff. Near the top, inscribed in bronze, and nearly hidden behind the glowing moss grown in decades' abandon, were the letters Kh-ee. Kh-ee, it'd been named, the fourth gate of the city's second mine.

"I sure am," came Troity's reply from the other end, munching on something.

Trameli felt offended at her younger sister's sad effort at a lie. Months apart, and Troity forgot who'd been the real deviant of the family.

"So, apu, the dives reminded me – I always wanted to ask you something..." Troity began.

"Here we go," Trameli sighed to herself. She looked at the time and at the piles of empty forms scattered on her desk, in between beakers, flasks and other equipment of her lab. There were experiments, commitments and deadlines. But this was her sister.

"What?" she interjected, hoisting her backpack and lunch, and leaving her desk, "Whether you were adopted? The answer's obvious, no?"

"Here I thought a placement in a research facility, in the upper city no less, would improve your sense of humor."

"Hope it improved your sense of worth, now that I'm not there overshadowing you."

Troity went silent.

"I'm obviously joking, Troo." She wanted to slap herself. "But I guess the melancholy gets the better of you near the mines."

After a pause, Troity said, "Don't call mom and dad, okay?"

"Don't do anything that demands it."

Trameli marched past her busy lab-mates and out of the lab, as casually as she could manage, and headed towards the nearest balcony.

"What was it you wanted to ask?"

"Why didn't you take the power she offered?" Troity asked.

"She?"

"The hollows."

Troity could hear Trameli's sigh through the earpiece. "First of all, the hollows don't offer anything to anyone. It's not sentient."

"Debatable," Troity said, as she jumped over a few cracks, careful not to spill the jhalmuri. She felt that familiar sensation, even beside these cracks. Thin and shallow, these reached like outstretched fingers, or at least like the veins that make them, towards the many alleys of the city behind her. In front of her, they merged and deepened, returning to the mountain, behind the gates where the hollows rested.

"I was young, Troo. I was too young for powers like that."

"But they're harmless."

In the late afternoon light, under

the early tungsten of the street, Troity studied her jhalmuri cone. As usual, it was a page from a school textbook. The equations were clearly from the Chemistry book, fifth subject in their college curriculum – above her grade. Class 11 or 12? The page number, however – she carefully opened a corner fold – was 33.

"I don't mean what it does to your body," Trameli said, munching on something herself. "It takes a bigger toll in other aspects of your life. The power changes everything. Your responsibilities, your purpose. What is expected of you, and what you must become. I didn't feel I was ready to be a hero, a guardian of this city."

"And so, you chose which life instead?"

Troity reached the end of the road, where the city dissolved and the gates awaited. The enormity of the gates did not distract her, as she'd been here before, several times. She scanned around it instead. From both sides of the gate, latching onto the mountain wall, spread the

miner's quarters. Little hovels, of brick, earth and bamboo, stacked on top of each other for rows and rows. Strips of bridges and ladders connected them. Chaotic in their make, yet, Troity could discern with her trained eyes an ordered division, into mohollas, floors, and homes.

Then she let her other eyes, the ones also cyber-enhanced, scan for police and spies. She spotted a few dozen drones, crept up in the shadows, waiting for the evening's delinquents. "The life of a scientist? A lover, albeit short lasting? Or simply of a sold-out soul?"

"The life of my own choice. Not dealt to me by some power from the shadows beneath."

Trameli was practically running now.



ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

The facility was a maze of marble. If it wasn't for her frequent visits, from her regular longing to view the cityscape, to breathe in the clouds, then she wouldn't have found the nearest balcony in time.

"But what if the powers were there to help? They're just instruments, to reach your true purpose."

"What guardian propaganda have you bee-"

"You remember, um, the equation for glucose metabolism? Which grade did you read that in?"

"Huh?"

"C'mon, use that researcher brain."

"12, why?"

"Great, one extra ladder. Anyway, it's not propaganda. It's what I feel."

"What you... You're not thinking of diving, are you?"

"The hollows beckon me, apu. I know it. I yearn it with all my being. I feel the

same sensation you did, from the depths."

"It's so different now, my love. It's not magic tricks anymore, or schoolyard flex. The upper city council sees the guardians as genuine threats. They're thwarting, and arresting and... and worse."

"It is an exercise in bittersweet, apu, every time I match her pulse, and every time I miss. I understand your caution, your reluctance, I truly do. But to me, she holds my calling, and I want to lose myself to her."

Troity pushed open the trapdoor beside house 3, floor 12, moholla 5. She was smart enough to use the modulus key, a "%10H" jotted down on the card spoon. She followed the narrow cave behind the trapdoor, already treaded, and awaiting new arrivals throughout the evening.

"You are so brave, Troo. But courage blinds."

Troity reached the end of the cavern, which opened up to the mine's inside.

Beneath her laid her salvation – the hollow's gaping maw, a continuous crooked chasm of rock and darkness.

"It is so so scary, apu, the depths."

Chitchat of those anticipating the night's dive echoed around the inner halls.

She spotted traces of leaping golds and gliding silvers, blurs of guardians in the air, supervising and preparing.

"Oh, my sweet..."

"It's comforting, apu, your voice, even if it's so far away." She breathed in the air, heavy above the hollows' pull. She swore she could see pulses of shadow in the cavern walls. She sensed her beckon.

"Stay with me for a bit?"

"Forever and more," replied Trameli, wearing her mask. "Don't dive until we finish talking." She grasped at the wisps of cloud in the balcony, that crossed over the high safety wall. Using powers kept secret for years, she leapt in the air.

"No worries, I have the perfect snack to keep me busy."

Trameli dreaded the confrontation. Would she save her sister, or would the lies cut deeper? She wondered, as she conversed with Troity. "Curious, are you in Kh-i, Kh-ee or Kh-u?"

She made her wait, until she could whisk her away from a hero's folly.

Guided by the clouds' own secret, trained by nights of escape, Trameli hopped over the wall and dashed through the open air. Her silver trace – a falling star, from the heavens back to the depths.

Jhalmuri for the hollowed in-between

FATIUL HUQ SUJOY

"To what do I owe today's melancholy call?"

"There's talks of a dive tonight, in the hollows."

"Ah. And you're obviously staying put, safe in your room, miles away from the mines?"

The jhalmuri mama handed Troity her jhalmuri in a paper cone with a square card on top as a spoon.

"Extra ghugni, no chilis," he confirmed, his cyber-enhanced eyes ever judging. Troity nodded, transferred the credits and headed towards the gate. Even from her vantage through narrow alleys a hundred strides off, the gate towered like a monstrosity in silence. Enormous slabs, of iron and wood, sat closed and plastered against the rocky cliff. Near the top, inscribed in bronze, and nearly hidden behind the glowing moss grown in decades' abandon, were the letters Kh-ee. Kh-ee, it'd been named, the fourth gate of the city's second mine.

"I sure am," came Troity's reply from the other end, munching on something.

Trameli felt offended at her younger sister's sad effort at a lie. Months apart, and Troity forgot who'd been the real deviant of the family.

"So, apu, the dives reminded me – I always wanted to ask you something..." Troity began.

"Here we go," Trameli sighed to herself. She looked at the time and at the piles of empty forms scattered on her desk, in between beakers, flasks and other equipment of her lab. There were experiments, commitments and deadlines. But this was her sister.

"What?" she interjected, hoisting her backpack and lunch, and leaving her desk, "Whether you were adopted? The answer's obvious, no?"

"Here I thought a placement in a research facility, in the upper city no less, would improve your sense of humor."

"Hope it improved your sense of worth, now that I'm not there overshadowing you."

Troity went silent.

"I'm obviously joking, Troo." She wanted to slap herself. "But I guess the melancholy gets the better of you near the mines."

After a pause, Troity said, "Don't call mom and dad, okay?"

"Don't do anything that demands it."

Trameli marched past her busy lab-mates and out of the lab, as casually as she could manage, and headed towards the nearest balcony.

"What was it you wanted to ask?"

"Why didn't you take the power she offered?" Troity asked.

"She?"

"The hollows."

Troity could hear Trameli's sigh through the earpiece. "First of all, the hollows don't offer anything to anyone. It's not sentient."

"Debatable," Troity said, as she jumped over a few cracks, careful not to spill the jhalmuri. She felt that familiar sensation, even beside these cracks. Thin and shallow, these reached like outstretched fingers, or at least like the veins that make them, towards the many alleys of the city behind her. In front of her, they merged and deepened, returning to the mountain, behind the gates where the hollows rested.

"I was young, Troo. I was too young for powers like that."

"But they're harmless."

In the late afternoon light, under

the early tungsten of the street, Troity studied her jhalmuri cone. As usual, it was a page from a school textbook. The equations were clearly from the Chemistry book, fifth subject in their college curriculum – above her grade. Class 11 or 12? The page number, however – she carefully opened a corner fold – was 33.

"I don't mean what it does to your body," Trameli said, munching on something herself. "It takes a bigger toll in other aspects of your life. The power changes everything. Your responsibilities, your purpose. What is expected of you, and what you must become. I didn't feel I was ready to be a hero, a guardian of this city."

"And so, you chose which life instead?"

Troity reached the end of the road, where the city dissolved and the gates awaited. The enormity of the gates did not distract her, as she'd been here before, several times. She scanned around it instead. From both sides of the gate, latching onto the mountain wall, spread the

miner's quarters. Little hovels, of brick, earth and bamboo, stacked on top of each other for rows and rows. Strips of bridges and ladders connected them. Chaotic in their make, yet, Troity could discern with her trained eyes an ordered division, into mohollas, floors, and homes.

Then she let her other eyes, the ones also cyber-enhanced, scan for police and spies. She spotted a few dozen drones, crept up in the shadows, waiting for the evening's delinquents. "The life of a scientist? A lover, albeit short lasting? Or simply of a sold-out soul?"

"The life of my own choice. Not dealt to me by some power from the shadows beneath."

Trameli was practically running now.



ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

The facility was a maze of marble. If it wasn't for her frequent visits, from her regular longing to view the cityscape, to breathe in the clouds, then she wouldn't have found the nearest balcony in time.

"But what if the powers were there to help? They're just instruments, to reach your true purpose."

"What guardian propaganda have you bee-"

"You remember, um, the equation for glucose metabolism? Which grade did you read that in?"

"Huh?"

"C'mon, use that researcher brain."

"12, why?"

"Great, one extra ladder. Anyway, it's not propaganda. It's what I feel."

"What you... You're not thinking of diving, are you?"

"The hollows beckon me, apu. I know it. I yearn it with all my being. I feel the

same sensation you did, from the depths."

"It's so different now, my love. It's not magic tricks anymore, or schoolyard flex. The upper city council sees the guardians as genuine threats. They're thwarting, and arresting and... and worse."

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