DHAKA, THURSDAY, JULY 25, 2024, *SRABAN 10, 1431 BS* | A PUBLICATION OF The Daily Star

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Witnessing the quota reform protests as a high school student

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

INTERNET BLACKOUT

How our youngest generations are dealing with this situation

FAISAL BIN IQBAL

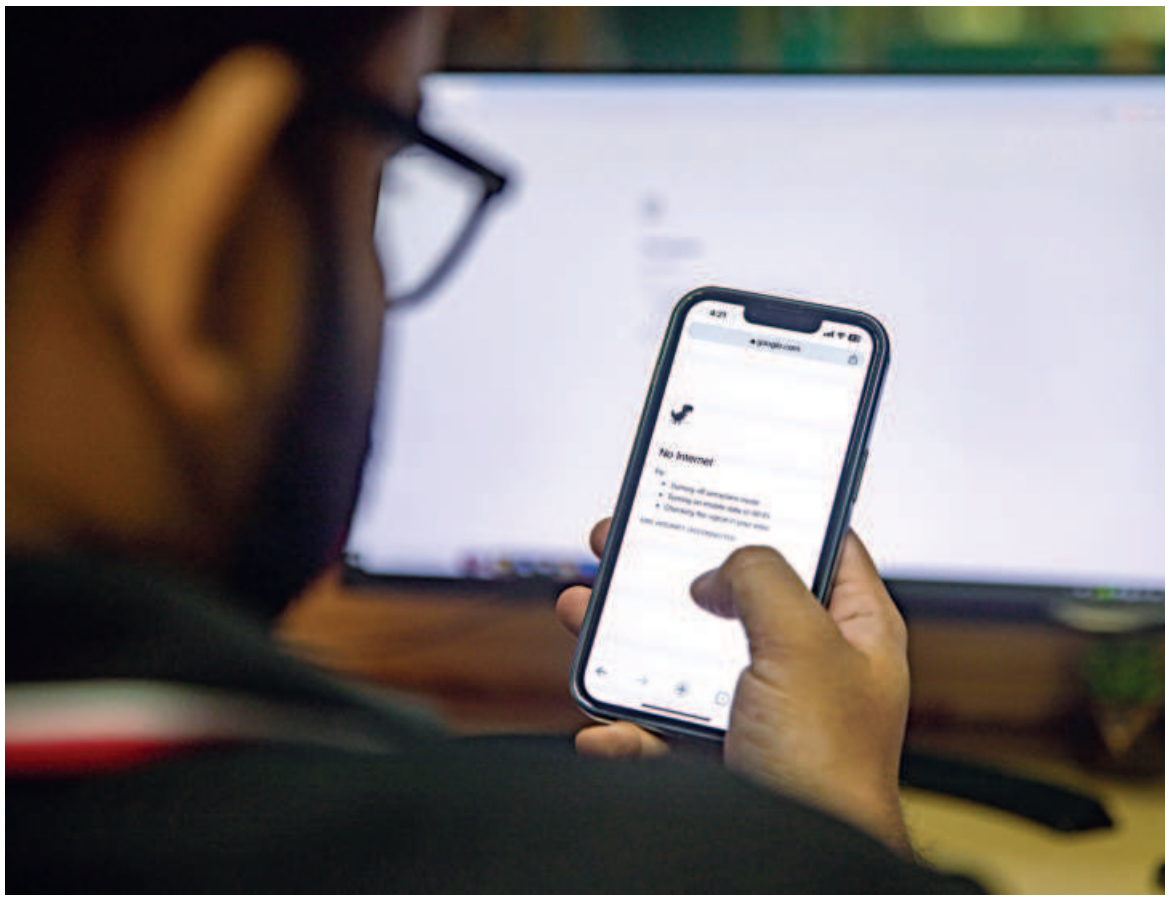

PHOTO: **ORCHID CHAKMA**

There's an entire generation of young people today who have grown up with almost constant access to the internet. Whether it's for academics, entertainment, or simply staying connected with their peers, these young individuals, along with the rest of the world have become heavily reliant on the World Wide Web.

However, as of writing this article, four days have passed since Bangladesh's countrywide internet blackout. According to reports, on July 18, a fire at a data centre located in Mohakhali, Dhaka crippled the country's entire internet infrastructure.

Millions of people have been disconnected from each other and subsequently, the world outside. Although not many might realise it, those from our youngest generation were of the ones hit the hardest by this internet blackout.

Instead of watching shows on television or movies on DVD players, kids from this generation grew up watching YouTube and streaming platforms like Netflix. Instead of owning CDs, or downloading and filling up memory cards with songs in MP3 format, they would stream music from all over the world through YouTube and Spotify.

The internet has also been important for this generation's academic needs. Many of them have teachers giving them homework online. Students have also been using the internet to attend online classes and to learn difficult concepts.

This is also a generation that grew up witnessing the rise of remote work – a concept that was rather foreign to many till the Covid-19 pandemic. They have seen their parents, siblings, and relatives work and earn from the comfort of their respective homes whether through local remote jobs or freelancing.

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Hence, when the internet was taken away from them last week, it was natural for them to feel puzzled. Most of them didn't own DVD players nor did they have music CDs or downloaded songs or movies. Many of them, for the first time, would go on to realise how many channels their TVs had.

Of course, it's not always fun and games or academics for this young generation. The internet serves other purposes as well, some of which are more important than everything else combined. This was evident during the recent quota reform protest that had began just weeks before the internet blackout.

While students from universities and colleges had taken to the streets in protest, those from the younger generation – almost all of whom are school-going kids – took to the internet to show their support for the protests and announce their solidarity.

This show of support and solidarity came in many forms, whether it be through sharing news stories or posts related to the protest, or being actively vocal about the necessity of the quota reform on different forums or social media threads.

The internet blackout took place during the peak of the Quota Reform Movement, and as outdoor movement was restricted – due to the unrest that unfolded and then the curfew imposed by the government – our youngest generations found themselves confused not knowing what to do or how to spend their time at home.

Even then, they did not hesitate to work out a life for themselves outside the confines of their smartphones and the internet. With schools shut, many turned to books to keep themselves busy. The cable TV became a major source of entertainment as well as keeping up with what's happening in the country. Some have even turned to board games as a form of leisure.

For many families, the internet blackout served as a way to connect better with their kids from this particular generation. Family and sibling time became more about humane interactions with each other and less about what they had seen on the internet. As for staying connected with each other, these kids exchanged text messages the old fashion way through their phone's SMS feature, not through Messenger or WhatsApp.

Now, as for showing solidarity with important causes like the quota reform protests, we have seen how vocal our youngest generation can be online. However, as was evident from the protests on the ground, many school-going kids had also participated in these protests. Hence, take the internet away from them, and these young minds will have no trouble taking their voice and activism out on the streets. Thus, simply calling them "keyboard warriors" is an insult to just how impactful this generation can be when needed.

By the time this article reaches you, the internet situation might or might not return to normal. However, if you are someone from the generation in question, don't worry; you'll be fine regardless.

Faisal is the in-charge of Campus, Rising Stars, and Star Youth.

How to get yourself to read (and finish) a book

For many, the thought of enjoying a book is merely limited to owning a copy of that book and having it on their bookshelf. Reading it, and eventually finishing it, however, feels like a massive undertaking. Which begs the question: Why is getting yourself to read and sticking to that book the difficult part? There are many tried-and-tested methods of getting oneself to read and also finish books. You only have to figure out which one works for you best.

For most people, the size of a book is what might repel them from picking it up in the first place. In that case, opting for something that's around 200 pages or so will be a good idea. If this also seems too much, go for a book of poems or even a one-shot manga – basically a single volume manga which you can easily finish in one go.

Having a favourite genre also helps here. Reading something from a genre you're fond of can help overcome the fear of having to finish a long book. Of course, you should occasionally venture out and explore other genres as well. However, it is a good idea to do that once you're comfortable with the idea of actually reading a book.

Being curious is another thing that can easily spark your desire to read and finish a book. The most common origin of this curiosity, at least in this day and age, comes from TV shows, movies, and anime.

Perhaps you liked a movie or a series so much so that you wanted to go through its source material just to get a better look at the details that were maybe dropped in the adaptation. Or maybe you're watching an ongoing TV show based on a novel series and don't have the patience to wait for the next season to find out what happens afterward.

A few years back, I saw many people pick up and finish George R. R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire series simply because they couldn't wait a year to find out what happened next. I was personally drawn towards different manga series because of the same reason – curiosity to know what happened next.

Now, your curiosity doesn't only have to be contained within the boundaries of your entertainment needs. It can be born out of your general interest to know something, which can draw you towards non-fiction books.

That being said, non-fiction tends to get boring for many, especially if you are not a fan of the genre. If that's the case for you, start with non-fiction books that doesn't feel overwhelming, perhaps with pictures. The presence of visuals can help cut the monotonous nature of these books to a certain extent.

A personal trick that got me into reading and finishing books is buying their original print copies. I call it the "brute-force book-reading technique". The idea here is very simple. Original copies are expensive, and simply buying such a book and not reading it, i.e. not deriving any utility out of it, means you're wasting money. Hence, even if it's just to get your money's worth, you'll end up reading the book.

Financially, it isn't a very clever decision to make. However, it does get the job done, especially if you value the money you spend. Also, if the book actually amuses you, you'll end up finishing it in no time. That way, you can also be happy with the fact that you didn't just read and finish it for the sake of it or to derive utility out of the money you spend.

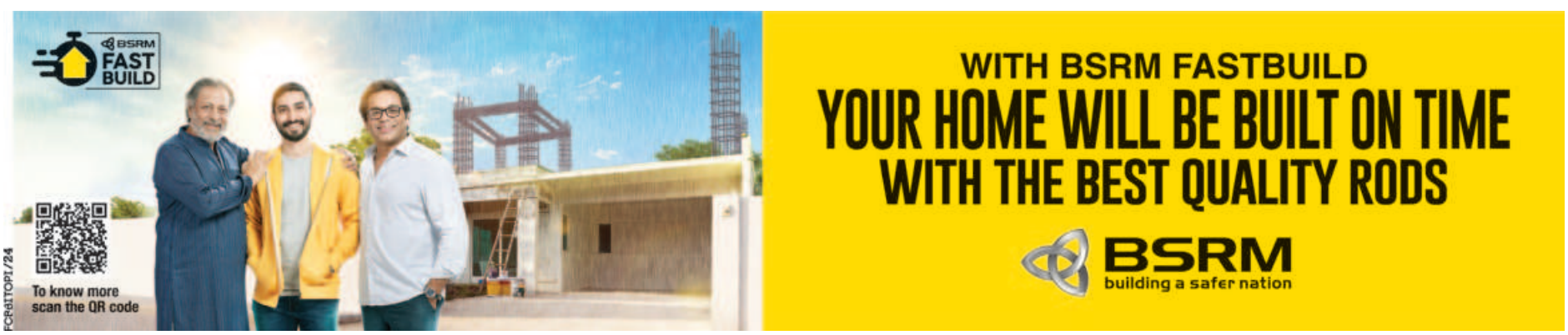

PHOTO: **PRABIR DAS**

Witnessing the quota reform protests as a high school student

I sit in my living room, watching the unrest through a screen. There's a certain futility about being a high school student during such times – you're too old to live in ignorance but, at the same time, too young to fully participate in these protests. That being said, the youth have other advantages – an acute eye for recognising injustice and an undying will to fight.

RUBAMA AMREEN

At the time of writing this article, the quota reform protests have been going on for several days. From blockades to rallies, protestors have expressed their dissatisfaction with the existing quota system in many ways. Among the masses that attended the rallies in the last few days, a significant portion consisted of students from various high schools.

Nazmus Sakib*, a school-going student, joined the absentee funeral that took place on the afternoon of July 17. He speaks about his experience there.

"There was an eeriness in the atmosphere that I cannot really explain," said Sakib. "It seemed that there were many undercover law enforcement personnel present over there. Of course, the students present at the absentee funeral were doing nothing wrong. Even then, I could sense that they were somewhat afraid, probably fearing that they might be attacked at any given moment."

"It was not a random event with random students who did not know what they were protesting for," Sakib added. "Every single person who was present over there knew what the protest was all about and why it was so unfair."

The day before the absentee funeral that Sakib attended, on July 16, the protestors put up a blockade from Asad Gate to Dhanmondi 27. Several high school students took part in this blockade, one of whom was fifteen-year-old Minhaz Abedin*, a student of class nine from Dhanmondi Government Boys' High School.

Sharing his experience at this particular protest, Abedin said, "I did not know anyone there, but they were all so helpful. An older female student gave me her marker to make posters and also helped me make them. Even though I was afraid, watching these strangers become my own people and reaching out felt very reassuring."

Amidst the rumours and threats of violence against protestors circulating on social media, the sheer courage of these protestors is tremendously admirable. Another protestor at the Asad Gate blockade, Sameer Sakin*, a student of class eleven at St. Joseph Secondary High School, shared how demoralising these threats can be.

"Much like anyone else, I also felt dispirited due to the existing threats," said Sakin. "However, the feeling was short-lived. If anything, the discouragement is why it felt so right to show solidarity with the protest."

When asked about his motivation behind taking part in the rallies and protests, Sakin aptly named frustration as the cause.

"I have been a penman for a while," he said. "This time, I felt that joining on ground would have more effect than my writing against injustice could have. Living, and doing anything else, but joining the protests felt wrong."

Our young voices do not stop at just joining the protests in person. The majority of our country's young student population took to different social media platforms to make their voices heard on the internet for as long as the internet was still accessible. Spreading awareness, sourcing legitimate news, and debunking rumours are all part of this generation's repertoire.

Raniya Ahmed*, a ninth-grader at Maple Leaf International School, stands among the many online protestors who spoke out. She says, "Hearing about havoc all over the streets, the deaths of unarmed students, yet not being able to do anything myself is the most heart-wrenching feeling ever. The bare minimum I can do now is support them by spreading awareness via the internet, and donations and verbally helping them. The students wanted nothing but justice and the anti-discrimination movement must get its attention globally and prevail."

Such passion and righteousness have always been akin to Bangladeshi youth, be it in 1952, 1971, or 2024. Poems and plays have been written about the bravery in our students' blood. We study them for Bangla lessons and praise them for their unwavering might.

And there are other, more subtle ways of protesting as well. When I first sat down to write this, a friend who is keen on photographic advocacy sent me a picture of a crimson stained sky, taken on July 16. Without mincing her words, she told me she'd felt as though the sky that day had been a reflection.

**Names have been changed upon request.*

Rubama is a part-time student, part-time activist, and a full-time writer.

PHOTOS: **ORCHID CHAKMA**

Looking after your mental health DURING A GAP YEAR

INQIAD BIN ALI

Gap years are stressful. Flung into the abyss of uncertainty during the application season, coupled with their long, final goodbyes from school-life, it's easy for students to get overwhelmed. This, in turn, can take a toll on their mental health.

For students opting for such a break before enrolling in university, taking care of their mental health becomes vital. This, of course, is easier said than done. After all, not everyone is able to handle the stress and anxiety that come with the struggles of applying to universities, especially when they have decided to take a gap year.

Even then, however, a few simple actions from the student's end can go a long way towards alleviating their struggles.

> **Doing these things gives you an avenue to steer away from your mundane lifestyles and rekindle your hunger as you strive for excellence in your university lives and beyond.**

Take things slow

Seeing your batchmates applying to and getting into their dream universities while you are left behind is difficult. You might be disillusioned into believing that you are not capable enough.

However, just because you took a breather in the form of a gap year does not mean you have lost all your abilities.

The university application process, alongside the overall admission journey, is a difficult ordeal in itself. If you are applying to universities within the country, you might have to sit for multiple admission tests. If you are applying abroad, you probably have to prepare for a number of standardised tests, write essays, and collect letters of recommendation from your respective schools or teachers. There is also the pressure of seeking out funding or scholarship opportunities.

All that being said, not everyone is suited to take on these challenging tasks simultaneously. However, contrary to popular belief, there is no reason to do all these at once. You take your time and take things slow, even if it means that you have to start doing these things a bit early. If you are taking a gap year, know that you have the time to take all the required tests and collect the necessary documents before the application deadlines.

Take one step at a time and avoid working on multiple things at once if you think it will stress you out even more. For instance, if you are preparing for the SATs, do just that; no need to work on your application essays at the same time if you think that it will just raise your stress levels.

Rediscover your passion

After years of going through a hectic academic life during your school days, suddenly having an abundance of time due to the gap year might feel rather daunting. This, however, doesn't need to be the case. Having this time to yourself allows you to properly explore your persona away from academia.

You must remember that there is a life beyond your notes and test papers. Gap years offer the perfect opportunity to explore your hobbies. From writing or singing to even volunteering at charities, there is a lot that you can do with the time in hand.

This period also gives you the perfect opportunity to roll back the years and enjoy old hobbies which you had to give up for rigorous schedules. For the more academic ones among you, the absence of exams might even help you rediscover the joy of learning, as it allows you to explore concepts at your own pace and choice.

Doing these things gives you an avenue to steer away from your mundane lifestyles and rekindle your hunger as you strive for excellence in your university lives and beyond.

Get a change of scene

It's inadvisable to spend all your time cooped up in your room as doing so can be bad for your physical as well as emotional well-being. It's also important to enhance your social skills, as you will be encountering a diverse group of people in university.

Hence, the importance of going out and interacting with others can't be stressed enough.

A change of scene doesn't mean taking a lavish or expensive trip to a tourist attraction. It can be something as simple as taking a walk around the neighbourhood, visiting a park in your area, or even catching up with friends at a restaurant or coffeeshop for a light session of reminiscence and banter.

Being fit mentally is crucial in crafting a good application. Unfortunately, what we often fail to realise is that a student's emotional strains might seep into their application profiles. This, in turn, can prevent them from fully expressing themselves in their applications or essays, and even hamper their preparation for standardised or admission tests.

Hence, for those of you taking a gap year, make the most of this opportunity and look after your mental health. Once you can ensure your mental and emotional well-being, you will feel more prepared to take on the challenges that await you during the admission season.

PHOTO: **ORCHID CHAKMA**

When we are BIRTHEDANEW

PHOTO: **ORCHID CHAKMA**

A.M. FAHAD

If a mole is a sign or a mark of a past love from a lost life
I would like to be birthed anew as a void
With you as my sculptor
An entity covered in love
I would ask you to mould me like you would do with wax
Tear apart this veil, this husk I am made of
All the rotten portions of it
When I was a child, we did not keep bandages at home
And the wounds stayed fresh longer than they usually do
So cling on to me like medicine glued to thin paper
Cover my wounds, hold on to my crumbs
Feed them to the birds; they are my friends
My bones are hollow
In hopes of mending all the broken fragments of violence
Brought upon myself – by the self –
With bits of love I can cover myself with,
I wait for you in the rain with empty hands
Think of it like this
Love
Is a persuasion
Of continuing the dreadful ordeal of existence
Love like a fisherman's hook
Or your favourite song playing in the radio, the smell of a crisp new book,
Sparkly feline eyes creeping up on you from behind the patio,
Broken voices from a tone-deaf bard and his guitar, or a breathless figure's love letter
And now here I am
I stand in front of you
The universe inside of me, as far as the naked eye can see
Two eyes. Two hands.
But the sockets are empty
Two souls, some flesh
Make me yours in ways irreversible
Make meaning out of these crevices in my skin
Do not think of my ghost fifty thousand years away from the two of us,
A world where there exists none of you
And even less of me,
Tonight, under the city's dark and silvery rain
When your eyes are met with mine
I exist

Motion

WAZIHA AZIZ

There are no lamplights in this end of the neighbourhood. Only tall trees standing upright on either side of the road, their leaves drooping down in lament for a long-forgotten motion. Here, night falls in bucketfuls. It washes over the street in waves with no shore to collapse onto. It seeps into alleyways and cracks in windows like transient spools of thread. The sidewalks – also on each side – are littered with dust and dirt and knickknacks and keepsakes.

They seem to have become shelters for all things given and gone. The surrounding boundary walls and heavily secured gates are meant to keep the draught at bay. Instead, these walls lean into the street. Their imposing demeanour only accentuates the heaviness. In between, lies the windless winding road. The point of its meeting the starless sky is indiscernible. It houses no strays, carries no dreaming homeless on its back. The walls bear no room for echoes to interrupt each other. Scarce is the whisper this silence cannot swallow.

His footprints adorn the sidewalk like a testament imprinted onto the ground. I am, I have been. A shawlis draped over his bare shoulders, the whole world hiding in its fading embroidery. His unkempt nails drag along a dusty wall.

And there within the enveloping void lies a lone defiant figure. An empty splotch of canvas amidst a wide expanse of ink. A glowing wisp tracing its way through the blackness. At times what seems to be a hint of smog swirling in the stillness, coming in and out of focus. His swaying limbs and discordant humming form waves in the stillness that surrounds him.

His footprints adorn the sidewalk like a testament imprinted onto the ground. I am, I have been. A shawlis draped over his bare shoulders, the whole world hiding in its fading embroidery. His unkempt nails drag along a dusty wall. They let out a screech that cracks open the atmosphere. His laughter echoes across the neighborhood. It, were anyone to brave the streets at this hour, could be heard from a thousand paces away.

There's music blaring from an old cassette player. The old traveler holds onto it. His only possession, it keeps the cold at bay. Were anyone around to hear him, that's what he'd say. The notes fall out of the boombox in a cascading motion, entering every collapsible gate and window bolted shut. The tune rises beyond the roar of the vacuum. Beyond this silent fog that seeks to hold him captive. The roads wind down towards a foreboding darkness, and the varying notes of the sitarcarry him through.

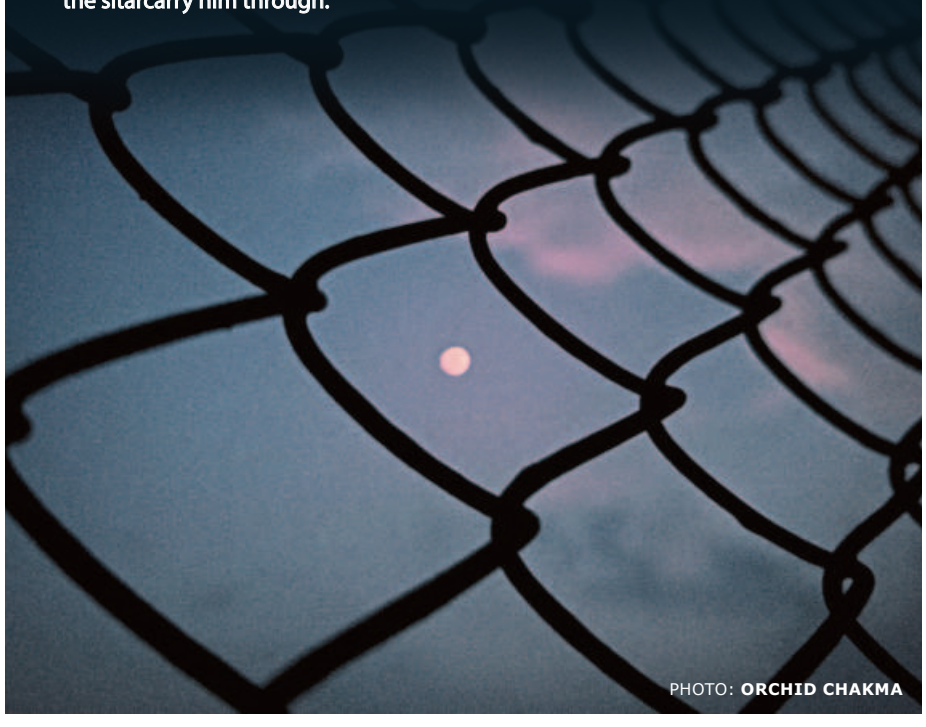

PHOTO: **ORCHID CHAKMA**

From grass to CONCRETEJUNGLES

The slow death of our playgrounds

MAHPARA FAATIN AND ROBIAH AREFIN IBN MAHMUD

Recently, students of Motijheel Government High School were confronted with devastating news – the iconic playground that they grew up with was about to be demolished. The reason? The government's proposed plan for the Mass Rapid Transport (MRT) Line-1 cuts straight through their beloved field. And between a high investment mega project and the basic amenities of a few school children, the latter had to go.

Unfortunately, this was no isolated occurrence. From the Gabtoli playground where many are actively pushing to begin various construction projects, to Durgapur Government Primary School where tobacco leaves were left to dry on the ground, playgrounds across the country are dying from neglect and abuse. Currently, a mere twenty percent of primary schools in Bangladesh have a dedicated space for children to play in.

When it comes to public playgrounds, it is still bad news all around. A 2019 study by the Bangladesh Institute of Planners (BIP) showed that Dhaka, a city of more than ten million people, to only have 235 playgrounds, 141 of those being institutional grounds. The significance of this deficiency was revealed by the Institute of Planning and Development (IPD). IPD concluded that Dhaka and Chattogram require 795 and 541 more playgrounds respectively to meet global standards for comparable metropolitans.

A big part of this issue is rooted in the academics-obsessed mindset endemic to the culture of Bangladesh. Our curricular policies reflect that – despite being a mandatory subject, physical education is not graded in any major NCTB exam, providing little incentive to parents, school administrators, or students to pay heed to their dying playgrounds.

Predictably, the scantly regulated market of private schools is an uglier scene. New schools are being propped up in practically every neighbourhood, squeezed into claustrophobic corridors of residential buildings that were never meant to serve as educational institutes.

Nishita Nuzhat*, a student at a prominent English medium school in Uttara, reminisces, "Our old campus used to have a garage as a playground. Now, the campus has been shifted, but there's been no improvement. Our new playground is a small rooftop that gets too hot in summer to play at all."

Unfortunately, with uncontrolled urbanisation driving property prices up and plot sizes down, this is only going to get worse.

While a few communities have stood up for their playgrounds, protests have proven to be scarcely effective, some even being met with punitive responses from law enforcement.

In regards to the matter, Adil Mohammad Khan, President of BIP and a professor of Urban and Regional Planning at Jahangirnagar University, says "After the playground at Dhanmondi 8 was occupied, there were widespread protests where some of the demonstrators were arrested by the police. However, in the end, the playground continues to be inaccessible to the public."

Prof. Khan also criticises many of these infrastructural projects as violating pre-existing government regulations, referring to a law passed in 2000 that "prohibits the destruction of playgrounds for construction purposes". Emphasising the rationale behind these laws, he goes on to add, "Playgrounds are essential for the physical and mental development of children. Thus, having access to playgrounds is their inalienable right."

Prof. Khan's fervent defence of playgrounds is backed by mainstream scientific literature that highlights the role of physical activity in childhood development. In particular, physical activity and sports help prevent serious physical and mental health problems, and teach critical soft skills like leadership and discipline.

Thus, the inaccessibility of playgrounds, directly undermines the ability of the youth to access these enormous benefits. And while there has been a rise in commercially-run playgrounds that can be booked for private sessions, these playgrounds are still scarce and remain beyond the budget for most people.

Even if some publicly accessible alternatives were to hypothetically become widely available, playgrounds at schools uniquely have a role to play in helping children stay active. For most students, the majority of the after-school hours are spent toiling away in coaching centres, leaving little time for play. Even on weekends, long commutes to parks and traffic congestions act as significant deterrents.

Prof. Khan offers valuable insight here saying, "If playgrounds are not available within 500 metres of homes, most children cannot regularly play."

School playgrounds also offer a level of safety that just does not exist within public spaces. Parents, especially when it comes to their daughters, are unwilling to let their children play in unmoderated environments where they're vulnerable to abuse and criminal activities. This leaves school playgrounds as the only option, with walled-off premises, security monitoring, and responsible adults to help out at the first sign of trouble. Thus, the onus falls on school administrators to keep their students active.

One day, when all open spaces have turned into desolate concrete jungles, there will be no going back. Before that happens, we must take swift and decisive action to preserve the collective childhoods and futures of the next generation.

**Names have been changed upon request*

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PHOTO: **ORCHID CHAKMA**