

From grass to CONCRETE JUNGLES

The slow death of our playgrounds

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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 scantily 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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