



DHAKA THURSDAY AUGUST 15, 2024, SRABAN 31, 1431 BS

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## What are the **POLITICAL EXPECTATIONS** of our youth?



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BOOKS

# THE BOOK THAT REBELLED

## Arek Falgun by Zahir Raihan

AFRA ANIKA NAWAR KHAN

*Arek Falgun* by Zahir Raihan, set in 1955, revolves around a group of student protestors gathered barefoot in front of the Shahid Minar. Raihan displays metaphorical nuances of camaraderie between the student protestors – all of whom come together to make a statement.

In the novel, one of the most significant themes is the student's rejection of any kind of law enforcement in their beloved Dhaka University. In any case, why should they allow weapons to enter their fortitude where they are taught knowledge is power?

Additionally, Zahir Raihan's depiction of women involves portraying them with courage. The women in *Arek Falgun*, a book written in 1969, have autonomy as they are the ones who choose their partners, contribute proactively to conversations, and participate in the movement on their own volition. He also sparks conversation of motherhood through Asad, one of the protestors. According to Asad, had he not been an orphan, then it would hurt his mother to see him walk the path of rebellion,

While Kiyo Khan plays the significant role of an antagonist, it's Bazle Karim who



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

rejects the student movement and his peers' attempt at civil obedience. In contrast to Bazle, Zahir Raihan also gives us Kobi Rasul, a poet and one of the pioneers of the student movement in 1952, in the book. Despite losing friends, and being enraged and hurt, he strives for freedom to speak in his mother tongue.

In fact, it is Kobi Rasul, who said in Bangla in response to a police officer's aggravation on not having enough room for all the detained student protestors at the end of the book – the lines which have immortalised Zahir Raihan's *Arek Falgun*: "*Ashche Falgun, Amra Kintu Digun Hobo*" (*We will be doubled by next spring.*)

OPPORTUNITIES



ELIGIBILITY

The student has to be an undergraduate student from a UGC-approved university in Bangladesh.

The student can't represent or be associated with any other media organisation.

The student must be a member of at least one student club or forum at their respective institution.

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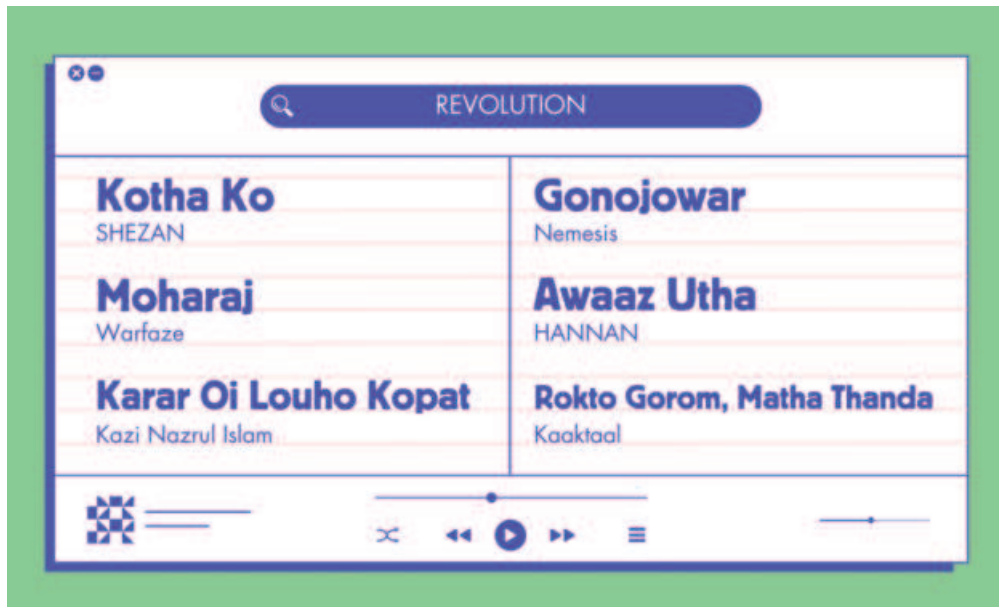
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# TALES OF THE REVOLUTION FROM CHATTOGRAM

**TAMJIDUL HOQUE AND WAZIHA AZIZ**

Bangladesh just witnessed a one-of-a-kind student movement which later transformed into a revolution, leading to the historical downfall of the Prime Minister. The whole country stepped forward and Chattogram was no different, living up to its name of "Bir Chattala". Throughout the movement, the students of Chattogram remained united while after the revolution, they took it upon themselves to help the community. The change, brought forward by the students, can now be felt throughout the city.

Mostafa Jishan, a student of University of Science and Technology Chittagong (USTC) says, "Honestly, I had nothing to do with the quota reform. My mother is a government employee and I, myself, can use the quota. However, when I witnessed the unjust shooting of Abu Sayed, I had to join the protest. How can the government allow law enforcement personnel to shoot innocent students like this?"

The students had to go through unprecedented horror. One such experience was shared by Tahamid Chowdhury Priyom, a student of Chittagong University of Engineering & Technology (CUET).

"The experience on July 19 at Bahaddarhat still haunts me. A student was shot right in his chest. There was no ambulance. He was taken to the hospital in a rickshaw by some of his friends. To this day, I still don't know if he is alive or not."

Reazul Islam Remon of Chittagong University (CU) says, "There was a lot of gunfire at Muradpur just before the curfew started and my family was scared. I had a long beard, but my mother forced me to trim it."

Another daunting experience was faced by Md Sadek Al Sunny of International Islamic University of Chittagong (IIUC) who says, "On August 4, we went to New Market where people were being attacked by law enforcement personnel. I was really close to the frontline when chaos ensued. More than 200 of us quickly took shelter inside Shah Amanat Market but thugs kept looking for us. We hid there until four in the afternoon when we were rescued. I witnessed two women getting shot and killed near Hazari Market that day. My biggest regret is having to leave their bodies behind."

The coordination amongst the protestors played a big role for the protest to succeed and it was the student coordinators who enabled it. One of them was Mohammed Tawsif, a student of East Delta University (EDU). When asked about how he became a coordinator, he said, "I joined as a protestor but was selected as the coordinator from East Delta University later on."

He recalls how he was constantly at risk throughout the protest, due to being a coordinator, "I had reasons to



PHOTOS: RAJIB RAIHAN



believe law enforcement personnel were looking for me and when they were conducting raids, they were targeting coordinators. Two coordinators from different universities that lived nearby got arrested. I was in fear that I could be next"

The risk was even greater when he was out on the streets. He says, "There were many instances where I was either chased or beaten by law enforcement personnel or goons. At Cheragi Pahar, I inhaled tear gas for the first time and I started vomiting and needed to rest. On August 4 alone, there were many moments where I thought I would die. One of those moments was at Jubilee Road in front of Golam Rasul Market. A person who was standing right beside me got shot. It could easily have been me."

However, after a tough journey, the objective was achieved, and it was special for Tawsif.

"When I got confirmation that the Prime Minister (PM) had resigned, I cried. Mentally, I had prepared to fight for the whole month of August. There were days I thought I wouldn't make it alive or get arrested. My sister would cry and not eat – waiting for me. After receiving the news, I felt relief that all the sleepless nights were worth it," he shares.

After the Prime Minister's resignation on August 5, there was joy but there were also instances of violence. One such experience was shared by Mona Ahmed, a student of Jahangirnagar University. She says, "My

experience at the victory procession was terrifying. After hearing about the PM's resignation, I immediately joined the procession with my friends. We walked towards Dampara from GEC Circle, and law enforcement personnel threw tear shells and sound grenades at us near BAWA School and College. We took shelter at Shilpokola. We decided to head back home but then my mother called to inform me that an angry mob had gathered outside my house, looking for a local leader that lived next door with his family. The individual has a wife and kids who are completely innocent, why must they suffer for someone else's crime? I decided to stay at a friend's house for the time being, but I was scared for my family's safety."

Another troubling experience was faced by Sudipto\*. He says, "When the PM's resignation was announced, I was happy for my country, but I also knew us minorities would be at risk. The attacks began the next day. I had to advise my own mother not to wear shakha and shindur outside. Why must I feel so insecure in my own home? Every time we voice our concerns, people tell us to be patient. They fail to understand that all we need is for them to hear us and stand by us in these troubled times."

Amidst the tough times, Sudipto also went out to help the community, "I've been involved in cleaning and wall painting activities near the Central Railway Building. I consider this my duty as a citizen of the country. Playing a part in its reform and development is the least I can do."

\*Name has been changed upon request.

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# WHAT ARE THE POLITICAL EXPECTATIONS OF OUR YOUTH?



PHOTOS: ORCHID CHAKMA

**“Restoring the election under a neutral interim government is necessary. Awami League scrapped the section for interim government after coming to power and that must be restored to ensure fair elections moving forward. our constitutions.**

**HASIB UR RASHID IFTI**

The country has drastically changed after the quota movement, for better or worse. However, one of the most evident changes is probably the sudden spike in political interest amongst the youth. Be it for an autocratic regime ruling for 16 years or the terrorisation of the university campuses by politically motivated groups, the youth have been disinterested in the political proceedings of our country previously. However, the quota movement completely changed the status quo. Over the span of a month, this generation has become politically active, vocal about their opinions, and have begun to express their ambitions about the future of Bangladesh.

For a country that hasn't had a fair election in a while, the primary target of our youth is ensuring a fair election. However, before the next election comes into play, people have high hopes for the interim government.

“I expect the interim government to take enough time so that a new opposition party can be formed,” said Rezwana Saima, a student of Dhaka University, “If BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami win the majority of the seats

next election, and they will probably create a coalition to form the government. That would leave the country without a strong opposition party. Previously, without the presence of a strong opposition, there was no one to control and question the government's actions in the parliament. I'm hoping for a student-led political party to be formed and for that, they need enough time by the interim government. Even if the newly formed party cannot win the election, they will prove to be a strong opposition in the parliament, which is the core of a functioning democracy.”

The interim government also needs to ensure the independence of the judiciary system, according to Nurtaz Henna, a student of Sir Salimullah Medical College, “Losing faith in the judicial system of the country instigates criminal activities and forces the common people to accept injustices. It forces people to take the law into their own hands, proof of which we have seen during the last regime. The judiciary system must be reformed to keep it completely independent and free from all political affiliations so that it is not subservient to any particular political party.”

Apart from that, changes in the constitution are also needed as per Sumitro Barua Uchchash, a student of Ahsanullah



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

University of Science and Technology, “Restoring the election under a neutral interim government is necessary. Awami League scrapped the section for the caretaker government from the constitution after coming to power and that must be restored to ensure fair elections moving forward. I also want to see actions being taken to uphold the freedom of speech as articulated in our constitutions. People should not have to live in fear of what they think, feel and believe.”

“The separation of power between the three systems i.e., executive, legislative and judiciary branches must be ensured,” continued Saima, “Decentralisation of power of the Prime Minister by the constitution should also be ensured. Moreover, if a state has its own religion, it cannot be truly secular because in that case, that particular religion will always end up getting prioritised the most. So, the state religion should be removed so that Bangladesh can be a truly secular country.”

“The constitution of Bangladesh has been reformed 17 times till now and each time, the political party in power have reformed it for their own benefits,” said Henna, “The constitution should be reformed in such a way that it becomes one for the people, of the people and by the people. The harassment caused by the Digital Security Act has traumatised the nation long enough and it should be reformed. Moreover, there should be an act that prohibits the same candidate from becoming the prime minister more than two times.”

Since independence, across military rule, Awami League and BNP regimes, the only constant in this country has been the oppression of the indigenous people. With the wind of change at bay, Ching Keu Prue Ethin, a student of Armed Forces Medical College hopes to see some positive changes, “The government should turn their attention to the people of the hill tracts whose land had been taken forcefully and restore the property to their original owners. Actions must be taken against those who made resorts by cutting down thousands of trees in the hilly areas, and by compelling people to leave their own land. People of the hilly areas need to be able to be self-ruled. External interference with things other than ensuring safety in the Chittagong Hill Tracts should be limited. Moreover, the case of Kalpana Chakma should be resolved immediately.”

Although the quota for government jobs has been reformed after the movement, Ethin believes there is still room for improvement regarding the Indigenous quota, “Most of the Indigenous communities toil really hard to access basic education. Considering their lack of privilege, the one percent allotted to them is less than the bare minimum, whereas the freedom fighter quota is still at five percent. So, the quota should be reformed to allot more to the people who are actually in need of it- the indigenous people, rather than the descendants of

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tyrants and politically educate people about our political climate and the electoral process. And lastly, the news media must stop serving the regime and must serve the people. They should be allowed to advocate for their right to publish unbiased news and reflect an authentic description of events.”

Henna believes that the development of the country under the interim government must be prioritised before the nation is ready to have a fair election, “Politically speaking, a fair and transparent election is crucial to re-establish democracy. But it is also true that no political party currently has the trust of the people. They are either potential tyrants or have already established themselves as one. Although a fair election is long overdue, it is necessary to prioritise reforms and development before we can approach an election.”

According to Saima, there are different aspects to a functioning democracy other than an election, “Democracy in itself is a broad concept. Sure, a fair election is a key part of it but it also includes transparency, accountability, the right to vote, freedom of speech and freedom of expression. It should also ensure protecting the minorities and ensuring the safety of our indigenous communities. When people from all walks of life can truly express their opinions without having to fear violent repercussions, only then can we truly be a democratic country.”

The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) curriculum has been criticised for a while now and yet the Awami League government turned a blind eye to it. With the fall of the regime, the youth believe it's the perfect time to reform our education system. “In the education sector, the real history of the country must be taught to the students rather than that which is manipulated by any particular political party,” said Saima, “The root of a lot of problems in our society lies in the fact that people cannot accept people who're different from them. We see instances of intolerance of people other faiths, men being intolerant of women etc. If children are taught about



freedom fighters.”

However, after 16 years of autocracy, students are fearing the wave of totalitarianism to be the new culture of Bangladesh. To prevent political parties in future from becoming autocrats and to ensure a swift flow of democracy, several steps need to be taken, according to Tasfia Tarannum Ridita, a student of BRAC University, “A good place to start would be by individually strengthening the three institutions of the government in order for the institutions to be independent of each other, encouraging free press, addressing concurrent corruption etc. But most importantly, we need to ensure electoral reforms such as ensuring the impartiality of the election commission, which was previously influenced by the ruling party.”

Anindya Alam, a student at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), believes that new political parties must come forward for a healthy flow of democracy, “Newer political parties with an injection of progressive ideas must come forward and appeal to the rural populace. More and more intellectuals should engage in politics. Our education system should also be reformed to reflect our history of undemocratic

diversity and acceptance in their textbooks, a change is plausible. The education system has to be inclusive so that it is accessible to everyone.”

Changes regarding women's and children's affairs are also long overdue, according to Ridita, “Proper laws taking action against women being vilified or harassed for their preferences is long overdue. The legal system must work to punish perpetrators of sexual violence. Martial rape should also be prosecuted.”

But for all of this to work, the people must abandon the idea of the usual major party rhetoric and choose the representatives for their qualifications, qualities, promises and deliveries.

“Fanaticism has been a major problem in our country,” said Sumitro, “We must learn to criticise and call out the bad policies even if that favours our preferred political parties. Mass people are still stuck on this AL, BNP binary which I believe is harmful for our democracy. We need to learn to look elsewhere and break out of this binary when it fails us.”

Remind Ifti to be less quiet at hasiburrashidifti@gmail.com



# Were we too quick to dismiss the efforts of student traffic volunteers?

PHOTOS: ORCHID CHAKMA

FATIMA JAHAN ENA

In the aftermath of August 5, Dhaka's cacophony welcomed a new addition. At any given point, one could hear whistles and hurried discussions of young people directing cars, buses, rickshaws, and even pedestrians to maintain a functional flow of traffic amidst the pandemonium of the country.

However, one could also hear talks of dissatisfaction and general complaints, either in hushed tones or more vocal methods of expression. On social media platforms, the number of posts commending the students' efforts was slowly matched by gripes and critiques.

As of August 12, it has been announced that the police will return to their regular duties, which include traffic management. The announcement is followed by a huge sigh of collective relief, not only for the return of law enforcement but also for the students being relieved of their traffic management duties.

The public reception up until now begets the question: did we dismiss the efforts of the students too easily?

It should be acknowledged that the students who volunteered to engage in traffic control duties did so completely out of their own volition, meaning they were not paid or compensated in any capacity. In the wake of the former Prime Minister's resignation, there has been a stark lack of proper law enforcement.

Therefore, in alignment with the spirit of the Anti-Discrimination Movement, the students continued to be engaged in the events of the country. This echoes the sentiments of the 2018 Road Safety Movement, where students took to the streets in order to enforce the security that the country has been so desperately lacking.

Another aspect that must be emphasised is the fact that the volunteers are young students. They have had no training, formal or otherwise, in road management. Over the years, the roads of our country have almost become synonymous with lawlessness. Roadside accidents caused by reckless driving became a common occurrence, one without any real repercussions. So, the

students' attempts at bringing some semblance of order to the streets purely came from their own desires to make a net positive impact.

The students' efforts did indeed yield some pragmatism in the way traffic was handled. The volunteers devised a system where they would spell "check" differently each day to ensure that drivers can't reuse the same chit to bypass security checks. Lanes were cleared for ambulances, reminiscent of the 2018 movement, still in contrast to how common it is to hear stories of people suffering from the incredibly delayed emergency responses. Some of the traffic volunteers



## Student volunteers on the road controlling traffic

even branched out their efforts in protecting nearby vulnerable spaces from vandalism and looting.

However, while the efforts are admirable, they are not without criticisms.

From the general public, a prominent complaint is how the students' methods of management are further contributing to the abysmal traffic conditions of the city. People undertaking long commutes have reported being stuck in traffic for hours, often citing that there is an unnecessarily large number of students standing in the middle of the streets, creating obstructions.

The attitudes of the students have been a point of contention as well. The general public, alongside bus

drivers, rickshaw pullers, and other vehicle operators have raised complaints about how some students have behaved harshly to enforce their management tactics.

The aforementioned complaints are valid, there have also been cases where the volunteers listened to the criticisms and internalised it, going so far as to correct their peers' behaviours if needed.

Additionally, the odds might have been stacked against the students since the very beginning. One can take a single look at a map of Dhaka and realise that infrastructurally, the streets of Dhaka are not designed to accommodate a lot of space for movement. Even if some of the main roads can handle a separate lane, the situation is completely different in the narrow streets that snake through most of the city.

Therefore, given the students' lack of training regarding traffic management in Dhaka combined with the confusing infrastructure of the city, the odds may have been against the students who took on the herculean task of traffic management. It can even be said that the students' perspective may have been more idealistic than practical in some cases.

But the focal point of the whole discourse should be that, at the end of the day, the volunteers are not out on the streets out of obligation, but of their own accord. These students have stood in the sweltering heat, oftentimes after conducting extensive night patrols. It is natural that one might get irritable when trying to handle the chaos that is Dhaka's traffic movement, especially in such a turbulent climate.

This isn't to say that the students should not face any criticism. The whole essence of the Anti-Discrimination Movement is to ensure that the masses can voice their concerns about the country, no matter how "small" the roles of the authority might be.

Having said that, the whole situation only further underscores how the volunteers should be given more opportunities to actively participate in civic duties as a commonplace activity, not as a last resort to maintain peace. The youth have proven their capabilities to bring forth progress time and time again. It's only fair that we give them the space to do so.

# Youth mobilise to safeguard minority establishments and places of worship

While such initiatives are commendable, they, of course, don't offer a proper solution to the primary problems at hand.

**AYAAN SHAMS SIDDIQUEE**

On August 5, as the country's former Prime Minister resigned, and celebrations ensued across the country, many breathed a sigh of relief. But that wasn't the case for everyone, especially not the religious minorities.

Soon after dark, that same day, temples, churches, and other minority establishments in different districts came under attack. Statues were broken, books were ignited, dumped into water, and guards were brutally beaten up. Bhaswar Roy, 20, one of my closest friends, was the first to tell me how "hellish" his rural hometown had become in just a few hours after Hasina's resignation.

He shares, "Around 4:30 PM on August 5, a Hindu neighbourhood in Khulna, where my relatives reside, was set ablaze. Our temples were attacked and the miscreants responsible for the unrest hurled slangs and curse words at the residents, demanding they leave the country if they want to survive. While people celebrated on social media, us minorities feared for our lives and everything we held dear. Is this freedom?"

This wasn't an isolated incident. Soon after the protest rallies died down, news of targeted assaults and vandalism against religious minorities flooded social media. As a result, the taste of victory was as short-lived. For those who put their lives on the line throughout the past few weeks, this was a difficult pill to swallow. This was, in no way, a proper reflection of the victory they fought so hard to achieve.

Accordingly, on the same night, residents from different localities started taking protectionary measures in their own hands. The result: patrol groups were formed to guard minority establishments from goons and hooligans throughout the day.

Nafisa Mehzabin, an undergrad student at North South University (NSU), took an initiative along with two of her friends to assemble a group that would protect the Siddheshwari Kali Mandir near Mouchak Market in Dhaka. Sharing the process of gathering volunteers, she says, "It started with one of our friends

making a post asking if anyone would be guarding the Kali Mandir on the night of August 5. Soon after, we decided to organise things on our own to form teams."

She continued, "After each of us posted about seeking volunteers, dozens of people reached out to us. By 11 PM, multiple volunteers assured us that they would be able to join the patrol team by midnight."

MD Mujahidul Islam Khan, 27, a student of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Bangladesh, also took such initiatives around Mohammadpur and Dhanmondi. He says, "People of our age are moved to do the right thing. Once news of communal violence broke out, many wanted to be able to do something about it from their own positions. As such, I made a post on social media seeking volunteers and invited some friends to share it. In a couple of hours, we had a lot of volunteers, the number of which exceeded 1000."

When asked about the areas they patrolled, Mujahid answered, "Firstly, we scouted every temple along the Rayerbazar-Mohammadpur bus stand area, patrolling each location for about an hour. Afterwards, we made our way to the Bashbari Sarbojonin Shri Shri Radha Gobinda Temple."

Samiee Islam, 24, who is currently pursuing his Bachelor's at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), volunteered to patrol a temple in his area as well. He shared his experience of safeguarding the area in the dead of night, ensuring no harm would befall his Hindu brothers and sisters.

"Every group of about five to ten people was supposed to guard the temple in three-hour-long shifts. However, I think all of us had stayed much longer on our own accord. The local Hindus were guarding the premises too and they were very hospitable. They treated us to snacks and beverages throughout the night for our kindness. Even the local Muslims – including children, young people, middle aged uncles, and aunties – chose to be there to protect their neighbours and friends," Samiee shares.

Nafisa also added that many residents of Siddheshwari provided the young volunteers with their business cards to call them should any problems arise. She mentions how slowly yet surely, young people's participation has been

encouraging the older generations to take a stand themselves, regardless of their religious identities.

However, while all these initiatives are commendable, they're not a solution to the primary problems at hand. Firstly, the very need for protection signals larger issues within our system. Years, if not decades, of religious intolerance, hate, and lack of inclusivity have contributed to ousting religious minorities from public acceptance. This has, in turn, stripped them of their right to feel safe in the country they call home.

Secondly, the presence of a handful of protection groups might perpetuate a false sense of security in the public sphere. One could argue that it has already begun, as evident in the thousands of "#HindusAreSafeInBangladesh" hashtags across social media. While it is true that many people are working hard to ensure that their places of worship remain unharmed, the number is hardly enough to cover every single locality in the country. Therefore, even though violence has hardly waned, forcing many to flee the country, citizens might turn a blind eye due to the apparent image of safety.

Moreover, true justice would be impossible unless change happens from a grassroots level and mindsets take a turn for the better. To combat the never-ending communal violence, diversity, representation, and policies that uphold the rights of religious minorities must be ensured.

Thus, the efforts cannot stop here; until our law enforcement officers return in full-scale, student and community-led protection drives must continue and grow in scale. And most importantly, if we are to establish an inclusive and secular country where people of all identities feel safe, we must come together as a society to uphold the rights and protection of minorities.

*Ayaan immerses himself in dinosaur comics and poorly-written manga. Recommend your least favourite reads at [ayaan.shams@gmail.com](mailto:ayaan.shams@gmail.com)*



Dhaka University (DU) PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED



DU PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED



Chawkbazar, Chattogram PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

# WHEN THE WALLS SPEAK



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