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RISING STARS

FOR YOUNG MINDS ON THE RISE

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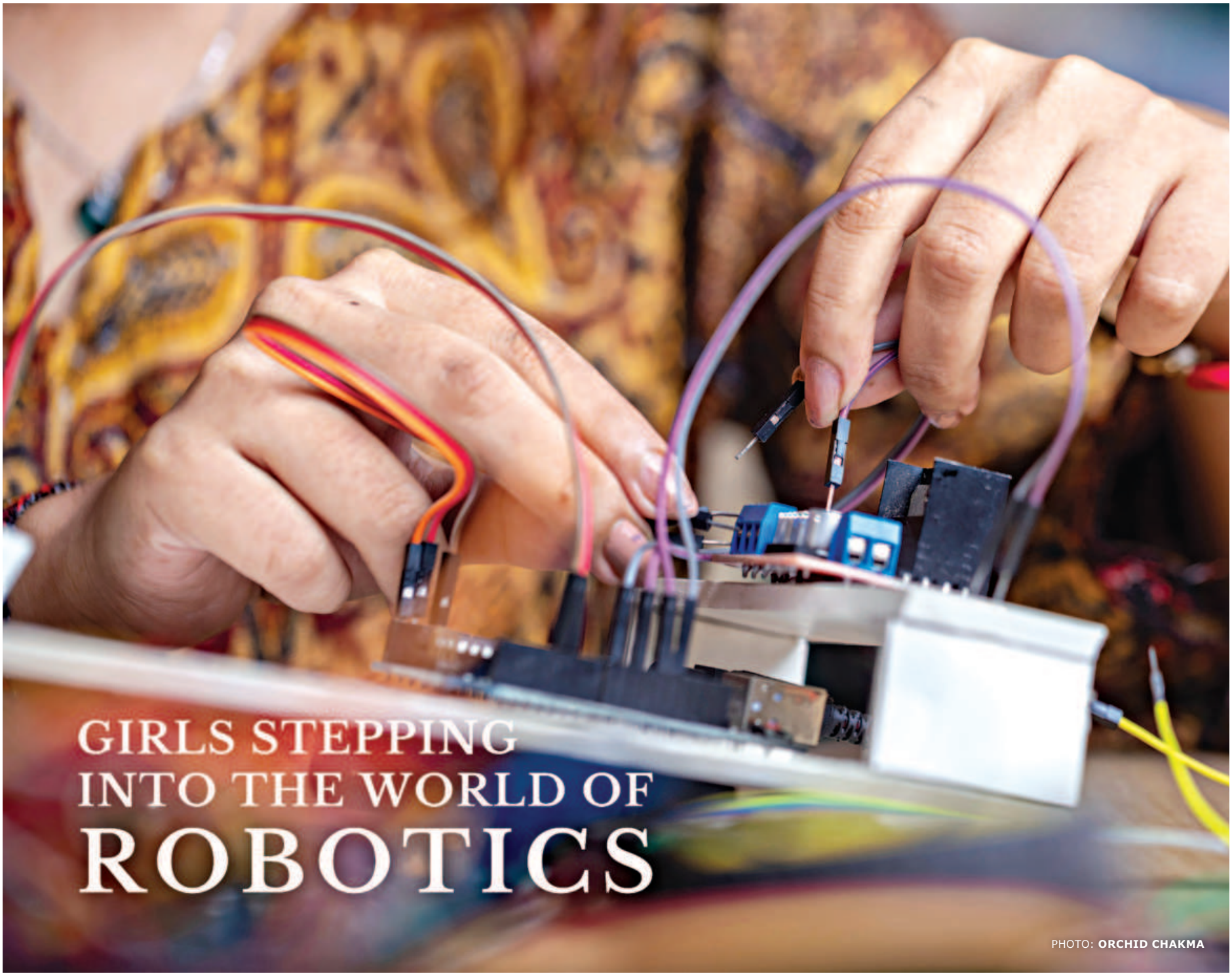


GIRLS STEPPING INTO THE WORLD OF ROBOTICS

PHOTO: **ORCHID CHAKMA**

STARDEW VALLEY is as good as farming simulators get

RAIAN ABEDIN

Farming simulators, as a subgenre of video games, seldom see anything new that attracts the eye. Of course, games like *Harvest Moon* have dominated the landscape for decades at this point (despite access to it being limited only to Nintendo devices or via emulation). But other than that, very few games have actually managed to remain relevant while also presenting a game built mostly around the idea of waking up every day to maintain a farm. This is understandable, as the core gameplay can quickly become tedious if it is not designed in a way that offers comfort and relaxation, alongside a dense world filled with secrets to discover and people to meet. Fortunately, *Stardew Valley* offers just that— and a little bit of fishing to top it all off.

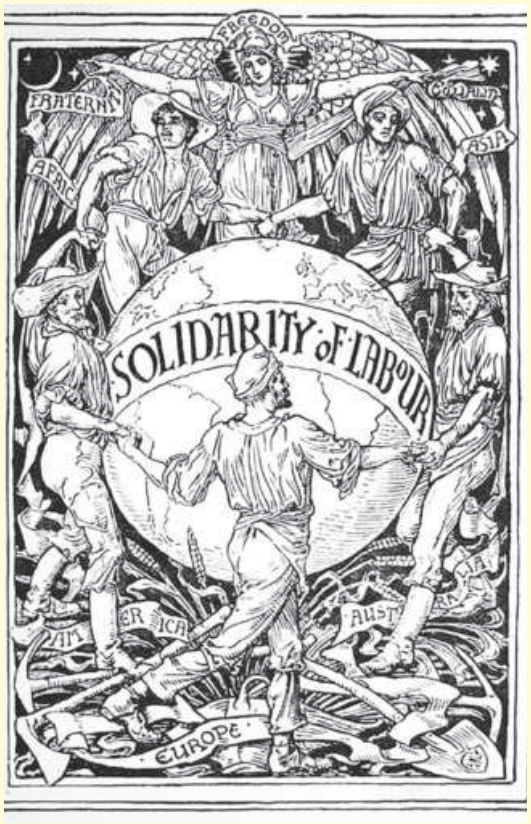
The game starts with a narrative setup that is bare-bones, and yet, is just enough to explain the context to the player: a corporate worker tired of your life, you decide to move to Stardew Valley after inheriting your grandfather's land upon his passing to start your own farm and a brand new life.

Now, while farming itself plays a crucial role in the day-to-day activities that make up the game, what really breathes life into *Stardew Valley* are all the townspeople and their varied, eccentric, and rather mysterious personalities. Getting to know these people is a long process, as it requires you to progress the game on various fronts to find unique gifts for them. Depending on your friendship level with these people, you get nuggets of information that allow you to get closer to them, which leads to numerous unlockables (and even romance options!). This method of gameplay may be very reminiscent of *Harvest Moon*, but what makes it so special here is how the game constantly pushes you to attempt new things in order to find new gifts for the townsfolk.

Farming is merely one aspect of what the game has to offer. There are tons of things to explore and unlock in order to discover more about the town which you now call home. The different mechanics offer a lot of excitement, keeping the game from feeling stale. Mining, for instance, is a constant hunt for rare ores, with combat mixed in to ensure that the player never gets trapped in a monotonous cycle. Then there is fishing, which brings with it a whole new world's worth of things to do. Things like cutting trees, removing grass, organising your farm, and managing produce slowly interweave and become a core part of the gameplay.

At the centre of it all, though, there is you and all the actions you choose to do. What initially attracted me about the game— and what still attracts me today— is how the game allows you to tackle it at whatever pace you desire. Yes, over time you will discover more stories and more secrets that the town has to offer. But there is never a need to rush. The game focuses on the idea of moving away from the rat race we are all used to and finding comfort in doing what we love— and, as a result, the game itself brings with it a well of comfort.

DID YOU KNOW?



THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERNATIONAL WORKERS' DAY

International Workers' Day, more commonly known as Labour Day or May Day, is observed on May 1 every year in honour of the working class, and to celebrate the contribution of the labour movement.

The date of May 1 was chosen by an international federation of trade unions and socialist groups in 1889 to commemorate the Haymarket affair of 1886 when a workers' strike in Chicago ended in a bomb attack and police gunfire, resulting in many being injured or killed. The federation called for international demonstrations to support the labourers' demands of an eight-hour workday. May Day demonstrations took place in much of Europe and the United States in 1890. The efforts of the labour movement resulted in workers all over the world securing the eight-hour workday in subsequent years.

With over 160 countries observing Labour Day as a national holiday, celebrations vary from country to country and have seen particular importance in communist and former Soviet bloc nations. Although it started as a simple demonstration for lowered work hours, International Workers' Day has become a symbol for working class demands and struggles, including equal pay for women, better working conditions, and fair remuneration.

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Lost in a real-life CHARLIE'S CHOCOLATE FACTORY

PHOTO: **AFP**

PHOTOS: **AUTHOR**

HIYA ISLAM

A few thousand miles away from Dhaka, in a small town located in the outskirts of Zurich lies a place known for its signature centerpiece worldwide, a fountain of real chocolate. Emphasis on real chocolate! It's the Lindt Chocolate Fountain, a giant, golden whisk standing at 9.3 meters that drips 1,500 kg of chocolate creating an illusion of endless creamy goodness that welcomes all your senses as soon as you step inside the enormous chocolate factory, the Lindt Home of Chocolate.

The entry doors work albeit in an amusingly different way. Unlike the preconceived notion of scan and enter, these doors only let you in at the time slot you selected during the online purchase. But of course, you are free to try a dozen times! Because I surely did. On the bright side, this means a bit more time to take pictures with the gorgeous fountain, if you're early. Or grab a sweet treat at the Lindt Café right next to the entrance doors. The most suitable ticket for adults and tourists is priced at CHF 17 or about BDT 2,345 and it is recommended to buy in advance.

The chocolate tour begins with a vast but digestible history of chocolate. Don't forget to grab the audio guide (available in several languages) which makes the learning process interactive and much easier, especially for those who do not want to read blocks of text. Personally, I found the introductory section of the museum very interesting and intellectually enriching. It simply makes you look at cocoa beans and chocolate differently. But, like the rest of my family, many prefer to fast forward to the chocolate tasting part!

This part of the building is the busiest, no doubt. Everybody wants to have a bite! It's like reconnecting with your younger self and finally fulfilling the dream of binging infinite chocolate. The first point serves hot chocolate from the three core varieties: dark, white, and milk. With a spoonful of white chocolate, I headed to the next section: chocolate bars! Now, here are huge dispensers with glass walls set up in a fixed carousel that pop a bar when your hand motions forward. Quick and easy.

There are over ten different kinds of flavour. And you must try them all. Jogging my memory, some of my favourites were sea salt, hazelnut, and orange. Mint, chili, and coconut were some of the one-of-a kind flavours that stuck with me.

At the end of the tour, you will find the world's largest Lindt store. For any chocolate lover, it's quite a bewildering experience. Whether it is a bar, or a ball, or something entirely different, I have spotted plenty of Lindt flavours that are not found anywhere else. My only regret is that I did not hoard enough flavours to try, a psychological side-effect of gorging mouthfuls of pralines. And as I left with a bag full of chocolatey souvenirs and little gifts from Lindt, I only wished to share this moment with the ones waiting for me at home.

Explained
LEAFCUTTER ANTS

MEHRAB JAMEE

As the species that has anointed itself as Homo sapiens (literally translating to intelligent human), even the scientifically uninitiated among us have a rough idea of what it means to be intelligent. Anatomically modern humans have existed for about 100,000 years now. We have fossil records of early hunter-gatherer societies from 10,000 years ago. Gradually, settlements emerged as agriculture and animal husbandry demanded these proto-societies to grow roots, literally and figuratively. With a surplus of food, our social groups started to grow and labour became specialised, giving rise to a diversity of professions and vocations.

This is where, according to most anthropologists, civilisation started. After delving more into the specifics of the animal world, we now acknowledge that many species possess both analytical and social intelligence. However, it is not an uncommon belief that humans are the only species that have made it into "the civilisation club." Surely, no other animal has gone through the agricultural revolution, right?

Well, it turns out there are at least 55 species of ants, known as the leafcutter ants, that have unlocked not only primitive agriculture but crop domestication, labour specialisation, and even the construction of megastructures.

Biological division of labour

A leafcutter colony begins with a single queen, who mates with three to eight males during a nuptial flight, a choreographed mating dance high up above the forest floor. A queen can then store the sperms (male sex cells) in an abdominal sac and produce a variety of worker ants over her lifespan of about 10 years. Each queen carries a specific fungus with her to an underground lair within which she lays her first batch of daughters, the 1.5 mm long Minims and 2.2 mm long Minors. The smallest Minim ants take over the cultivation of the fungus, take care of the larvae, and bring back foliage from around the nest, essential to keep the fungus growing, whilst the queen only lays eggs from here on out. The Minors can forage a bit further from the nest and act as the colony's first line of defence.

As the fungus grows, it requires more leaves as substrate. And, thus, kilometres of forest foliage are cleared to construct highways which better facilitate the transport of leaves to meet the needs of the colony. But files of undefended Minims and Minors carrying leaves over vast distances invite predators that the Minors alone are incapable of fighting off. This is when the queen starts laying eggs that hatch into 16 mm long giants called Majors and even larger Super-Majors. The sole purpose of this soldier caste is the protection of the home base and the highways that feed the colony.

Further down the line, at a point in the colony's continuous growth, the Minims reach their biological limit. They are unable to procure the amount of leaves required to sustain the growing fungus crop. And so, another biological faction — the Mediae, specialised in foraging leaves from far-off sources — emerges to increase the supply and overcome this hurdle. Many a time, small Minims are seen riding on top of homebound leaves being carried by the Mediae, to keep a lookout for potential predators.

The queen's descendants range from the minuscule Minims to the massive Majors. Although we understand the physical variation of these castes results from the sperm cells acquired from multiple partners during the nuptial flight, how the queen balances the delicate ratio of Minims, Minors, Mediae, Majors, and Super-Majors remains unknown.

Communication is key

The complexity of our languages is undoubtedly a pillar that supports our civilisation. Language is the tool being used even this very moment to communicate minute facts about an insect species. While leaf-cutters may not participate in reading circles discussing human civilisation (that we know of), their modes of communication support both phonetic and chemical dimensions.

Worker ants, either under attack from predators or buried underground accidentally, can vibrate their thoracic (chest) regions to produce distress signals. They're also capable of producing vibrations of a different frequency to attract their comrades to a delicious new food source their foraging party has discovered.

Certain chemicals called pheromones are used for chemical communication in the form of marking lanes. Similar to how we use traffic signs and lights to regulate traffic flow, ant trails convey traffic signals by the scent of pheromones. Ants diverging from their trails are guided back to these multiple-lane highways solely through olfaction. One might even say, this altruistic traffic flow results in fewer quarrels or collisions compared to peak-hour human traffic.

The domestication of fungus

The ants themselves lack the enzymes (biological chemicals) to digest the cellulose found in leaves. They depend on a specific type of fungus, Leucoagaricus gongylophorus, to digest the food externally. The ants then consume the fungus along with the digested nutrients. What's even more fascinating is that this form of fungus doesn't exist naturally anywhere else, only in leaf-cutter colonies. It depends on the precise atmospheric parameters within a colony and the leaves that the workers provide as substrate. This resembles how we've domesticated wild versions of grain-crops, fruits, or vegetables for our benefit in such a way that these plants cannot survive without our agricultural practices.

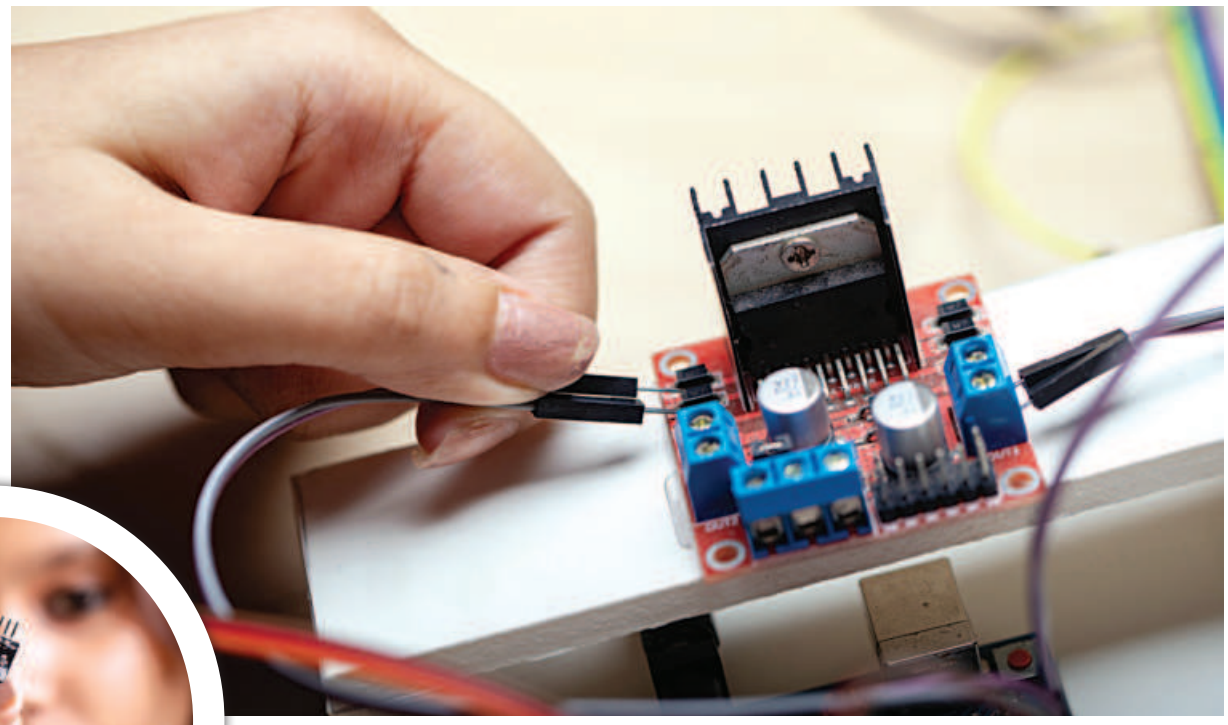
The symbiotic relationship between fungus and leaf-cutters has evolved over millions of years, with colonies with better yield of the fungus supporting larger colonies and populations ranging in the millions, much like human cities.

As human beings, we are accustomed to branding our form of individualistic intelligence as superior. After all, look at all that we've accomplished. But intelligence itself lies within a spectrum as well, with human beings leaning more towards the individualistic and leaf-cutters positioned more towards the collective. And as mentioned above, collective intelligence can lead to communication, planned agriculture, and specialisation of labour as well.

Yes, it's an imaginative liberty to call a leafcutter colony a city, but the parallels are evolutionarily significant. Altruism dictates that a worker ant put the needs of the colony above the needs of the individual. With so much polarisation all around us, we might look at these tiny creatures, realise how impressively close to a human civilisation they've constructed, and take a page out of their altruistic playbook once in a while. For all the problems our civilisations and our societies may have, we humans are nothing if not adaptable.

Girls stepping into THEWORLDOFROBOTICS

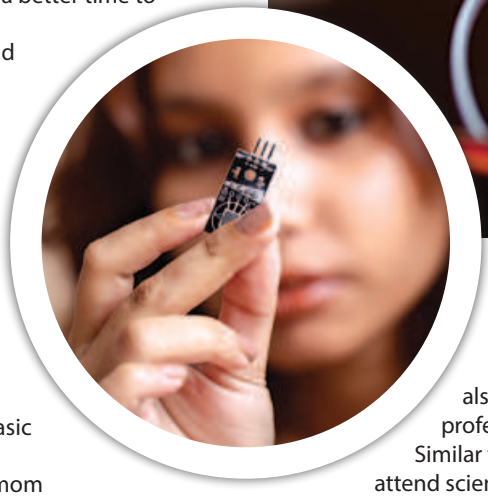
MAHPARA FAATIN



PHOTOS: **ORCHID CHAKMA**

Robotics is an exciting and rapidly growing field where creativity meets logic and innovation becomes reality. While it has traditionally been seen as a male-dominated field – often discouraging girls through stereotypes, lack of representation, and limited financial and emotional support – this is quickly changing.

Bangladesh, often overlooked in global tech discussions, has quietly cultivated a thriving robotics culture, particularly for young women. In fact, the national team that earned two gold, four silver, and four bronze medals in the 26th International Robot Olympiad (IRO) held in Busan, South Korea, marked a significant milestone for girls in robotics. Six out of ten members of that amazing team were women. For any girl who's curious about robotics but unsure how to start, there's never been a better time to dive in.



As robots are basically computers and do not understand human language, at least not directly, our only way of communicating with or commanding these robots is through programming languages. Hence, it is essential that you get comfortable with coding first before getting into the hardware side of robotics.

Your entry into coding doesn't necessarily have to be through robotics. Nasheetat Zainah Rahman, a three-time gold medallist at the IRO, entered the world of coding through basic game development.

"Since I loved gaming so much, my mom introduced me to Scratch – a block-based programming platform, says Nasheetat. "The ability to create my own games felt almost magical. It was my first step into the world of programming."

"At the same time, I had a deep love for LEGO, and when I discovered the LEGO Mindstorms EV3 robotics kit, I was instantly captivated by the idea of building and programming my own robot. That was the moment when my robotics journey began," Nasheetat adds.

Nasheetat recommends learning Python if you plan to work with Raspberry Pi kits and C++ if you plan to use Arduino. While both Raspberry Pi and Arduino are used in robotics, the latter is preferred for beginners while the Raspberry Pi is a better option for advanced robotics projects.

Once you grasp the basics, consider working on simple projects like obstacle-avoiding or line-following robots. If your school doesn't have a dedicated robotics club for you to seek help, there are various Facebook and Reddit communities that you can turn to. A major advantage for beginners is that tutorials for basic robotics projects are readily available on YouTube, so you can easily find step-by-step guides on how to get started with these projects. Once you familiarise yourself with the basics, you can think of attending workshops organised by various schools, universities, and organisations to learn more. These workshops are usually open to all, and Nasheetat, in particular, benefited from them.

"Eager to learn more, I attended an Arduino workshop which introduced me to more advanced robotics concepts," says Nasheetat. "It was also there that I first heard about the Bangladesh Robot Olympiad – a discovery that led to years of participating in competitions, countless hours of building and coding, and an ever-growing passion for robotics."

Attending robotic workshops also gives you an opportunity to seek professional feedback on your projects. Similar feedback can be obtained if you attend science fairs or participate in local robot olympiads. "Attending workshops organised by the Bangladesh Robot Olympiad (BDRO), in particular, will be immensely helpful here," says Namia Rauzat Nubala, a ninth-grader IRO gold medallist from HURDCO International School. "You can learn about robotics as well as prepare for the national rounds of the robotics olympiads."

Dedicated robotics workshops for girls are also organised frequently by these organisations. Similar initiatives are also taken by various independent communities and clubs to encourage more women to involve themselves in robotics.

As for the components needed to build robots, you can find them in local hardware stores. Most students and robotics enthusiasts, however, opt for online shops like RoboticsBD and TechShopbd to get the necessary hardware. One major advantage of buying from these online stores is that they deliver all over the country. For advanced projects, if you need special kits or components, some of these stores have the option to pre-order them.

Know that it's never too late to join robotics. Maisha Sobhan, a student at the Institute of Business Administration (IBA), Jahangirnagar University, and an IRO gold medallist, ventured into robotics only after finishing her SSC exams in 2022. "I mainly relied on online resources to teach myself from scratch with slight aid from a tutor," she shares. In just a few months, she went from being a beginner to a national-level competitor.

Beyond the technology itself, learning robotics builds essential skills like critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, and teamwork. Practical experience in this field also makes you a more competitive candidate when applying to universities abroad. Many past Bangladeshi IRO participants went on to study at prestigious universities around the world with scholarships.

Getting into the national team has its own perks. "My favourite part of doing robotics was probably the fact that I got to stay in a foreign country for a week with my friends, says Maisha. "The journey as a whole was very delightful and allowed me to learn and experience many new things."

All that being said, the path isn't always smooth for girls looking to get into robotics. Societal barriers remain, and girls are often discouraged from pursuing robotics, as the lack of local female role models makes it appear as a masculine field to many parents. This prejudice stems from our gendered upbringing that caters to the patriarchal roles assigned to us: boys are made to play with toy robots and build with LEGO, while girls are given Barbie dolls to play house with. A study by the Institution of Engineering and Technology (IET) found that only 11 percent of STEM toys were marketed to girls, reinforcing early ideas about who "belongs" in tech. This conditioning feeds into later under-representation.

"One thing that's still common, sadly, is the misconception that girls don't know how to work with hardware, so girls are thought to be less capable in robotics," says Maisha.

Concerns around safety and gender-based harassment further limit participation in public tech spaces. Such barriers to entry mean parents are often less willing to invest the same time, effort, and money into helping their daughters get into this field as they might be for their sons, mostly due to scepticism about whether their daughters' tech ambitions will lead to tangible success.

Thus, getting started with robotics as a girl doesn't just change your life; in a way, it changes the field itself. After all, it challenges stereotypes, diversifies innovation, and empowers the next generation of girls. You might not have had role models growing up, but you can be one for someone else.

As a final word of advice, Maisha says, "Believe in yourselves. I used to think I was just lucky, but I realised my hard work mattered. Believing in yourself gets you halfway there—the rest is consistency."

The importance of mental health education in schools

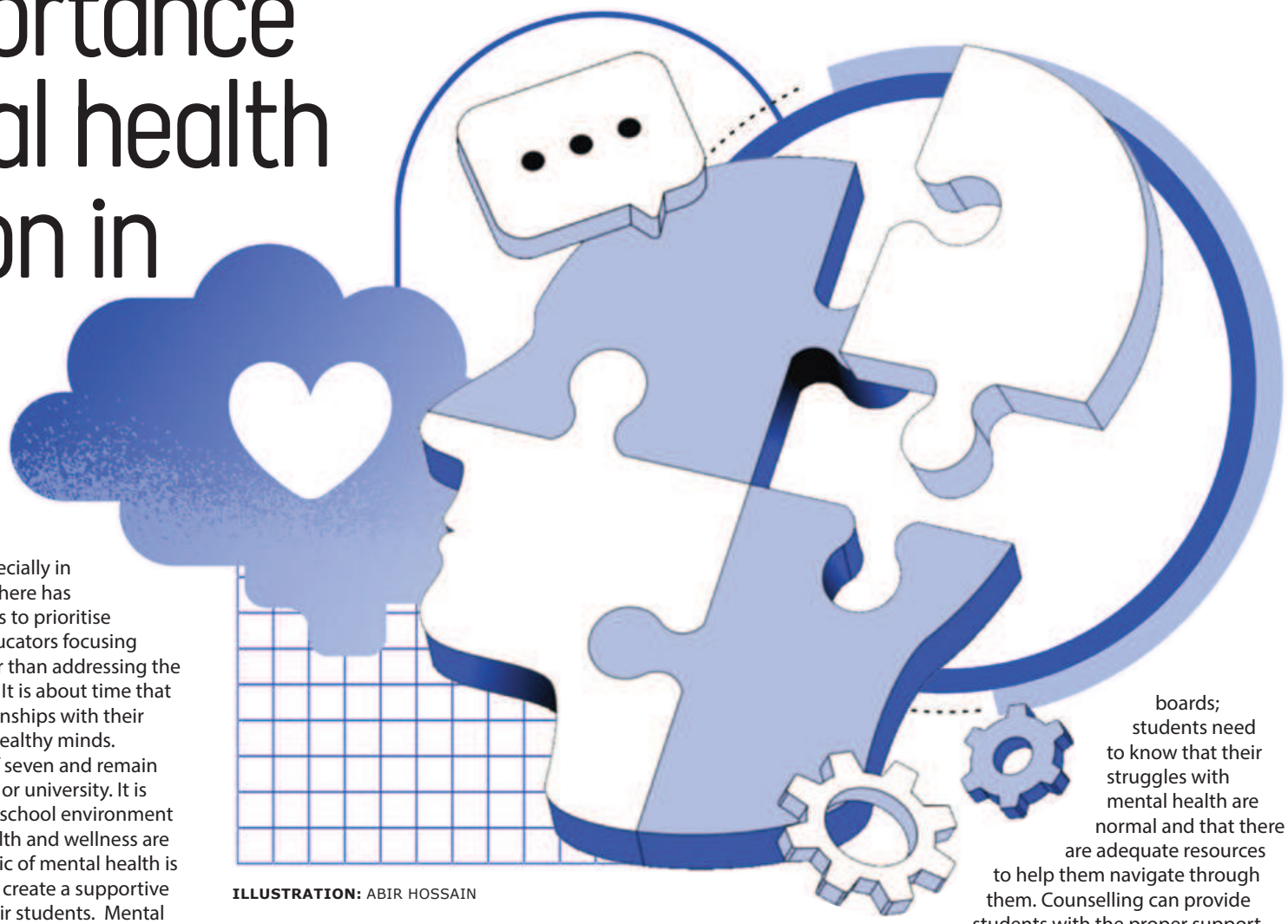


ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

SILWAT QUADER

As much as mental health has been in discussion in recent years, little has been done to address and implement mental health support, especially in our educational institutions. For ages, there has been an unchanging practice in schools to prioritise discipline over understanding, with educators focusing more on managing students' behaviour than addressing the underlying causes of students' distress. It is about time that schools started building healthy relationships with their students and investing in developing healthy minds.

Most of us start school by the age of seven and remain in that same environment until college or university. It is essential, therefore, to create a healthy school environment where open discussions on mental health and wellness are encouraged. In a society where the topic of mental health is so heavily stigmatised, schools need to create a supportive and understanding atmosphere for their students. Mental health, being a vital part of a person's everyday life, is as important as physical health and there is no doubt that it profoundly impacts a student's well-being and academic performance. Thus, mental health education and awareness should be a priority for school authorities.

The path to destigmatising discussions on mental health

School is where we begin learning everything, from our ABCs to navigating the social world. It is natural, therefore, for us to learn to talk about our mental health at school as well. While talking about how one feels comes easily for many, it is equally as difficult for others. Many people fear societal judgement or give in to cultural taboos regarding openly discussing their mental health struggles, and end up refraining from seeking help. To combat this stigma, conversations about mental health issues need to be normalised.

Along with academics and good societal manners, schools should invest in teaching students how to communicate their mental state. Schools can take a step towards it by promoting awareness and education among students to normalise conversations about these topics so that they can express themselves freely and converse easily. If young people are not taught to advocate for their mental health or talk about the issues they are facing, they may continue bottling up their struggles and avoid seeking help until they are actively in crisis. Schools need to take an active part in preparing students enough to prevent that.

Education should be a holistic approach

Education is the cornerstone of a country's development but Bangladesh's education policy has seen limited progress over the years, with the curriculum remaining stagnant towards its emphasis on rote learning. The focus on rote learning needs to take a back seat and a holistic approach has to be adapted to ensure the mental well-being of our students. This involves understanding the broader context of a student's life and considering the emotional and psychological factors that contribute to how they act and perform in school. There is a common misconception that students who struggle with behaviour or academics are simply lazy, slow, or disruptive, ignoring the possibility that they might be dealing with significant emotional and psychological challenges, such as trauma, anxiety, depression, stress etc., that are contributing to their struggles.

Instead of physically or mentally punishing the students, schools should focus on understanding the root causes of their problems and providing appropriate support. This should particularly be the case in high schools where academic pressure often immensely weighs upon students, often adding to the struggles they are already undergoing.

Most of us start school by the age of seven and remain in that same environment until college or university. It is essential, therefore, to create a healthy school environment where open discussions on mental health and wellness are encouraged.

What can be done to promote mental health and well-being in schools?

Schools in our country fail to realise that the needs of each child are uniquely different, as is their emotional maturity. Authorities should consider these differences to establish a dedicated, professionally equipped counselling department. Teachers having a few months of training in student counselling is a necessity, but it is definitely not enough. Mental health professionals need to be hired by schools to provide well-rounded services. Additionally, schools should hold monthly seminars and workshops on mental health and wellness to promote mental health awareness.

Mental health education needs to be more than motivational posters in hallways and pamphlets on notice boards; students need to know that their struggles with mental health are normal and that there are adequate resources to help them navigate through them. Counselling can provide students with the proper support they need to be able to understand their emotions, navigate conflicts and doubts, and share their experiences and feelings. It can empower them to assess their abilities, interests, and needs, and to find constructive solutions for personal and social adjustments at both home and school.

Taking small initiatives can go a long way towards helping students. Lessons on neurochemistry coupled with deep, interactive conversations about how our mind works and why we feel what we feel can be integrated into science classes. Language classes could incorporate sections on writing essays about how the students are feeling so that they can learn how to think about and articulate their emotions.

Public schools usually don't have the resources to develop a functioning mental well-being support system for their students. Despite having the means and resources, private schools fail to address the lack of mental health awareness and support in their schools due to their unwillingness. However, schools need to recognise the necessity of mental health services and try to allocate some funding towards them to ensure that all students have access to the support they need.

There exists a pressing need for schools to prioritise mental health education. By providing mental health education, they can help students manage stress as well as teach them to communicate their feelings and show empathy towards others. Having early educational knowledge on mental health can go a long way towards equipping them with the necessary skills to bounce back from adversity and effectively manage present and future challenges, preventing them from falling prey to mental health crises. It also builds a positive relationship with one's mind.

A proactive approach to mental health and wellness builds valuable life skills and emotional intelligence, preparing students for real-life struggles and fostering a much-needed culture of openness about mental health and accessing mental health resources.

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WHEN THEY LOOK AWAY

PHOTO: **ORCHID CHAKMA**

HASIB UR RASHID IFTI

It took two and a half hours to get to the stadium. From the car, one could see the lines stretching two to three kilometres all the way from the entrance. The girls in the backseat were worried about how they'd have to wait at least another half an hour to get in – and that too in the April heat. The one driving the car, Asgar, was worried about finding parking after dropping them off.

Asgar didn't have time for lunch today. He had arrived a bit late for duty that afternoon, and he could see how enraged Iva was from the frown above her eyes, the puff in her cheeks, and her flaring nostrils. Asgar's employers are usually pretty well-mannered and courteous when it comes to hiding their rage and disgust in front of others – but Asgar doesn't really count as 'others'. They don't pay him fifteen thousand a month, lunch included, just to have to show decency to their driver.

"It's okay, ma'am," Asgar lied, hoping Iva wouldn't start shouting at him. "I had my lunch at home, so we can start right now!"

When Asgar dropped Iva and her friends off at the concert, she handed him a 100-taka note and told him to get some dinner, in case the concert ran late. Asgar took the money and nodded gratefully, hoping Iva would forget about him arriving late today and not complain to her father.

Asgar drove around the stadium complex, trying to find parking under some shade. Then he could sit in the car with the windows open and get some sleep. Without shade, the heat was too much to bear, and opening the windows only brought in hot, dusty air. During the heatwave last May, Iva's mother got furious when she caught Asgar inside the car all by himself with the air conditioner on. He'd been extra careful in finding the right parking spot since then – preferably under a tree, but not too far from the exit, since Iva hated waiting for the car to come pick her up.

Asgar finally found one, under an extended balcony on the second floor of the stadium building. He could see a group of drivers a few feet away.

"Bhai, do you know a restora somewhere around?" Asgar asked.

The five of them laughed together.

"That's what we were just talking about! There isn't a single one in the entire area. Jobbar here had the audacity to go ask one of the stalls what a single egg sandwich cost. Tell him, Jobbar!" one of them laughed, slapping Jobbar on the back.

Jobbar looked gravely embarrassed by his foolishness. "Three hundred fifty taka," he said quietly.

The others broke into wheezing laughter, clapping as they did.

"How much did your one give you?" one of them asked Asgar.

Asgar searched his pocket and showed them the hundred-taka note.

"Not bad. Rokib here got fifty."

"What can you even get for fifty? Chih!" one of them consoled Rokib.

"I know their habits very well," said Rokib. "That's why I had two plates of rice during lunch – way more than I had appetite for. This will have to do till tomorrow morning."

Tomorrow morning felt like days away in this heat. But at least it would be a new day –and one day less than sixty-two. That's how far he was from his next vacation. He gets two a year, on the two Eids. That's when he gets to see his wife and son. No child should have to see his father only twice a year, but asking for extra time off two years ago had earned him a final warning from Iva's mother, before she threatened to fire him. So, he saved up his emergency leave and used it when his mother passed away.

When the headliners took the stage, Asgar and the others could hear screams from inside the stadium. Rokib recognised some of the songs, but it was too hot out in the parking lot for him to enjoy them.

"8:03 PM," said Jobbar. "It'll go on till at least eleven. Then another hour to get out of the area and cross the traffic."

"Do you think they think about us?" Asgar muttered.

The deafening noise from inside the stadium slowly dulled. Asgar knew all five of them had heard the question – because they'd all asked it themselves at some point. The people inside the stadium, the ones in the restaurants, in the theatres, at the shopping malls, at the weddings – do they ever ask themselves: Where do they really go during those long hours?

"Is this your first time waiting this long?" Jobbar asked.

"I think so," replied Asgar.

"It'll come soon," said Jobbar. "It's hot enough out here."

"What do you mean?" Asgar asked, as Jobbar raised a hand and shushed him.

As they sat quietly, Asgar saw the soil beneath them getting wet with drops of water. He looked up, searching for rain but the sky didn't have a hint of cloud. When he looked at the others, he saw them all staring down at the ground as drops of sweat fell and formed a stream. In no time, it pooled into a transparent sheet of water.

Asgar could see his reflection in the pool. His face, his shirt drenched in sweat – it all looked the same. But in the reflection, the sky above their heads was pitch-dark, like the minutes before Kalboishakhi. From the other end, he could smell petrichor.

As he knelt down to breathe in the scent and the cool air, he slipped and fell face-first into the pool.

Jobbar laughed and helped him up.

"You see, Asgar," he said, "the world needs someone to drive the brats around. But if the drivers, the rickshawalas, and the security guards keep dying from heat strokes – who'll open the car doors for them? This world, it finds a way to keep the rats alive, you see. And so, when the heat becomes too unbearable, and when the pigs aren't looking – the portal opens up."

The five of them lay down on the concrete floor, looking up at the thunders crackling between the clouds. In the distance, Asgar could see some other drivers lying on the grass. The band inside the stadium had started their final song. The drums, the cheers from the crowd – none of it reached Asgar as he closed his eyes and listened to the hush before the storm.

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SHANUM SARKAR

on winning Silver in the International Psychology Olympiad

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

ADRITA ZAIMA ISLAM

The International Psychology Olympiad is an annual competition for highschool students interested in the fields of psychology and mental health. Shanum Sarkar graduated from Bangladesh International Tutorial in 2024 and went on to win a Silver for Bangladesh in the International Psychology Olympiad (IPsyO) this past August. With the deadline for registering for IPsyO 2025 fast approaching, I sat down with Shanum to discuss their journey of securing this achievement on the world stage.

How did your interest in psychology begin?
My interest in psychology, and mental health more broadly, started when I noticed that my close friends and family were struggling with mental health issues. Mental health definitely does not get the attention that it needs to in Bangladesh, and it is stigmatised to a large extent. I found that odd and disheartening, particularly because I could see how that stigmatisation created hurdles for my close ones in receiving the appropriate help they needed. I wanted to be able to address the issues that lie with discussing and tackling mental health issues in Bangladesh in the future, and that motivated me to start studying the field.

Can you detail the process you underwent for participating in the olympiad and expand a bit on the format of it?
IPsyO is much more accessible than other olympiads because there are no qualifying regional or national rounds, and the international round is free to sign-up for. In 2025, IPsyO will be introducing a qualification round to precede the final round. This year's exam had three different types of questions. There were eighty objective questions, three short-answer questions, and one application question. The content focused on six main areas: introduction to psychology and scientific inquiry, biological bases of behaviour, cognition, development and learning, social and personality psychology, and mental and physical health.

How did you go about preparing for the olympiad?
I had Psychology as a subject during my A levels. A lot of the content I learned for my exams built up and strengthened my base and the knowledge I carried from my A level experience helped me easily grasp a lot of the concepts I had to learn while preparing for the olympiad. The olympiad organisation does have available course resources. However, those resources are behind a paywall so I opted to not use them. Besides the IPsyO materials, the olympiad organisation recommends reading *Psychology* by David G Myers and *Psychology: A Concise Introduction* by Richard A Griggs for general psychology and *Research Methods in Psychology: Evaluating a World of Information* by Beth Morling and *Research Methods in Psychology* by John J Shaughnessy for psychological research methods. These are available online.

What was your experience of participating in IPsyO like?
The International Psychology Olympiad really stands out from other olympiads because the event has a new theme each year and all of the questions revolve around said theme. This year, the olympiad focused on the use of Artificial Intelligence to better understand and identify mental health challenges and to devise strategies to tackle these challenges as a public health problem. I feel like the olympiad's focus on real-world applications allowed me to embrace the multifaceted practicalities of psychology and broadened my understanding of the field, something that I am grateful for. As a student who hopes to study psychology for my undergraduate degree, preparing for and participating in the olympiad have been massively helpful in solidifying my interest and expanding my knowledge base.

What advice would you give to students who wish to participate in the upcoming IPsyO?
I would say, start preparing early. There is a massive amount of content to learn, much more content than A levels/or anything a high school will ever cover. Try to get your hands on whatever resources you can find. Look thoroughly through the IPsyO syllabus provided on their official website and make sure to build an understanding of each of the topics listed.

There should be some sample papers available on their website. I would recommend you time yourself while taking the practice test since there will be a significant time crunch during the actual olympiad. The olympiad has a practical application question worth forty points so I would suggest delving into that aspect of psychology as much as you can.

An important thing to remember is that even if you don't end up winning anything, just know that you tried your best and that is enough. No medal will ever replace the learning experience you will gain. Preparing for an olympiad is no easy feat and it requires years of working hard behind it to be able to succeed. So, you should be proud of yourself regardless of whether you achieve something or not.

Very few people from Bangladesh are currently participating in IPsyO. What do you think can be done to change that?
I think it is necessary for IPsyO to increase outreach by connecting to different schools and other educational organisations to encourage more students to participate. Psychology is a vastly interesting field and I believe Bangladeshi highschool students will have a lot to gain by participating in the olympiad.

Zaima is barely a functioning student these days. Reach out to them at zaima2004adrita@gmail.com