

Teenage gangs and a failing social order



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In recent times, a disturbing pattern has taken hold in our society, with groups of boys barely out of their adolescence seen roaming the streets armed with knives. Recently, they again made headlines when a teen gang attacked four students from Dhaka University and Jagannath University in Lalmoni, leaving one of them stabbed. In the district towns, sometimes you see them film themselves stabbing rivals and proudly circulate the footage on social media. Across cities and districts, gangs with names like "Eagle," "Black Star," "Twist," or "Rockstar" have emerged. Their adopted slogans—"Born to Fly" or "Boss for Life," for example—are not merely adolescent fantasies, however. They are a declaration of rebellion against a society that seems to have no meaningful place for them except in the shadows of crime.

In other words, these incidents are part of a metastasising crisis exposing how deeply our social order is faltering. A casual look at the list of incidents would read like a grim catalogue: a child raped by teenage delinquents in Habiganj; expatriate families extorted by gangs in Noakhali; Rohingya minors in Cox's Bazar being absorbed into organised criminal groups; or towns or cities being plagued by "big brother" backed networks that blend politics, crime, and juvenile desperation into a combustible mix. What we are witnessing is not random chaos but the crystallisation of a parallel social order—an alternative "career path" for a generation systematically failed by their institutions.

What's fuelling this surge in teenage crime? The answers lie not just in policing failures but also in the deeper fractures of our collective life. Poverty and economic deprivation set the foundation. Drug abuse—marijuana, yaba, even inhalants—further corrodes restraint, creating both dependence and the need for money that drives extortion, mugging, and theft. According to reports, many of these boys skip school, wander

Schools and colleges, which ought to be sanctuaries for children, often double as recruiting grounds for teen gangs. Students unwilling to join them often find themselves harassed, robbed, or beaten. Parents, fearful of retaliation or reputational harm, often remain silent. Another dimension in this problem is the increasing influence of social media. Messenger groups and Facebook pages have become organisational hubs for

sensational incidents—raids, arrests, promises of reform—only for the cycle to resume weeks later. Teenagers are picked up, granted bail, and often return emboldened by a sense of invincibility. In too many cases, police officers hesitate to confront gangs that enjoy protection from influential patrons. If arrests are delayed or investigations languish, it only emboldens the gangs.

But the problem cannot be reduced to the

activities. This is a colossal policy failure. While the state focuses on macroeconomic growth indicators, many of our children are growing up with fractured moral compasses, unstable family lives, and no meaningful path to inclusion.

It is tempting to dismiss these groups as petty criminals. But this overlooks the deeper threat they pose. Teenage gangs do not simply injure individual victims; each stabbing, each extortion, or each public brawl also erodes the sense of safety and trust in our communities. They normalise violence at an age when empathy and discipline should be cultivated. They redefine masculinity through domination, coercion, and cruelty. And they foreshadow the emergence of more entrenched criminal syndicates, as disaffected adolescents grow into hardened adults.

The rise of juvenile gangs in Bangladesh also poses a philosophical dilemma. What does it say about a society when its children inspire fear rather than hope? In a sense, these boys are not just criminals—they are casualties. Casualties of families fractured by poverty, migration, and addiction. Casualties of schools that confuse memorisation with moral growth. Casualties of a state that measures development in concrete and currency but ignores the collapse of civic virtue.

So, the answers lie in rebuilding the social institutions that give adolescents a sense of belonging and purpose. This means investing in school-based counselling and mentorship, expanding drug rehabilitation programmes, training parents in modern child-rearing practices, and creating meaningful after-school activities that channel youthful energy into sports, arts, or community service. It means rethinking policing through community engagement rather than brute force. Above all, it requires de-politicising youth and dismantling the toxic networks so that "big brothers" cannot exploit adolescent desperation for partisan gain.

None of these measures is quick or easy, but without them, the cycle will deepen, and the gangs will evolve into more organised criminal syndicates. A society is ultimately judged not by how it treats its most powerful, but by how it nurtures its most vulnerable. If we allow our children to be continuously consumed by knives, drugs, and "big brothers," then the promise of our demographic dividend will collapse into a demographic nightmare.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

around in packs, and quickly become attached to the orbit of "big brothers". In return, they receive protection, identity, and even a distorted sense of purpose.

Drugs and poverty explain only part of the picture, however. The collapse of education as a stabilising anchor is equally corrosive.

teenage delinquents, amplifying their reach and networking. In this digital realm, "likes" and "shares" are replacing moral compass with performative notoriety.

The state's response to this crisis has been frustratingly superficial so far. Law enforcement typically reacts after a

failure of law enforcement alone. It is the outcome of a broader policy vacuum, one that has squandered the nation's demographic dividend. Instead of being harnessed for productive employment, innovation, or social leadership, thousands of young men are drifting into gangs or crimes or desperate

The generational mismatch of wealth



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Uncle Selim was 25 in 1985. Fresh out of Dhaka University with a degree in economics and a moustache thick enough to warrant all compliments of masculinity on earth, he landed a job at a state-owned bank. The pay was modest, but it came with dignity, stability, and the ultimate prize: a pension.

Within five years, Selim bought a plot of land in Mirpur. His colleagues smirked. Who would want to live in Mirpur, then dismissed as a wasteland of tin sheds and poultry farms? But Selim was smug. Land was cheap, dreams were affordable, and the future looked like something you could purchase, brick by brick.

Fast forward to 2025. Meet his daughter, Nabila, also 25, also with a degree in economics—hers from a private university where tuition rivalled the GDP of a small upazila. Her first job is at a multinational, and her title is so long it could double as a novella: *Associate Junior Assistant to the Regional Something-Something*. The salary looks generous—until rent, Wi-Fi, and Uber rides bleed it dry (not to mention the side of regular "social eating out").

She marks her employment milestone

with overpriced caramel lattes and Instagram captions like #GirlBoss, while privately calculating how many lifetimes it would take to afford even half the Mirpur plot her father bought with lunch money.

Selim often reminds her that he struggled more. And in fairness, he did. Load-shedding was so relentless that he could recite Dostoevsky by candlelight. Floods turned buses into clumsy submarines. Jobs demanded punctuality, but delivered salaries weeks late. His struggles, however, yielded assets: land, a home, and a pension that still pays for his blood pressure medication.

Nabila's struggles yield anxiety. Selim's collateral bought him a house. Nabila's rent buys her a shoebox flat with neighbours who treat baseline volume for music as a suggestion rather than a courtesy.

Education paints the gap in bold strokes. Selim walked into Dhaka University on merit, ambition, and the support of a public education system that still believed in social mobility. A degree then was a golden ticket. Employers queued at convocation gates.

Nabila's degree is more like a metro card—useless unless constantly recharged with

postgrad diplomas, unpaid internships, and LinkedIn workshops. Employers don't queue anymore; they seldom reply and, more often than not, they ghost.

Housing is the cruellest punchline of this saga. By his thirties, Selim had built a two-storey home with savings and a bank loan at interest rates that didn't feel like extortion. Today, tenants pay for his retirement. Nabila, meanwhile, lives in a flat with three houseplants she jokingly calls her

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investment portfolio. She dreams of ownership, but the property market laughs in her face. Even if she stopped eating and breathing, the maths wouldn't work. "Buy property early," Selim advises with the smugness of a man

sitting on three plots. Nabila nods politely, then opens her food delivery app, confused between groceries and the luxury of edible food.

Consumption has evolved, too. Selim's generation stretched every taka, patched clothes, and reused everything from jam jars to gift wrappers. Savings weren't optional; they were instinct. Nabila's generation spends on experiences: sushi nights, overpriced yoga mats, and co-working spaces with plants and playlists.

She can summon a car in 60 seconds, but owning one is as likely as inheriting Buckingham Palace. Cars now are fancier than ever and therefore guzzle petrol more than ever. Petrol—the costly prince and parasite.

And yet, not everything is bleak. Nabila has freedoms Selim never imagined. She can apply for a remote job in Singapore from her bedroom, launch a start-up with nothing but Wi-Fi, or pursue a PhD in climate policy in Berlin. Her world is larger. Her possibilities, more fluid.

Selim built equity in land. Nabila builds equity in networks, ideas, and skills. The tragedy is that these intangible assets don't always translate into tangible security.

But perhaps the biggest difference lies in psychology. Selim's generation carried war scars but also optimism. They invested in land, education, and children with faith that tomorrow would be better.

Nabila's generation carries global exposure—but also decision fatigue. They can code, freelance, and work remotely from Bali, but they can't plan beyond a month.

The dollar bullies their currency, inflation mocks their salaries, and politics feels like betting on a horse with three legs.

Decision fatigue is their new daily currency. Every choice—from career paths to grocery apps—comes with a hundred tabs open in the mind. Should she invest in a mutual fund or that climate tech start-up her friend mentioned? Is it wiser to switch jobs for a pay bump or stay for the mental health days? Should she move to Canada, start a business, or just learn German and see what happens?

For Selim, life followed a path: job, land, marriage, house. For Nabila, the path is a maze, constantly redrawn by economic shifts, social expectations, and algorithmic distractions. Freedom, it turns out, can be exhausting when every option feels both promising and perilous.

Two generations. Same age. Two economies. Selim bought land with five years of savings. Nabila can't buy peace of mind with a lifetime of earnings. He built houses. She builds coping mechanisms. He left behind property deeds. She leaves behind Wi-Fi passwords.

The irony is that both believe they had it harder. Selim swears by sacrifice. Nabila insists on precarity. They're both right. But the truth is simpler: one generation inherited scarcity and turned it into prosperity. The next inherited prosperity and turned it into anxiety.

And maybe that's the most honest economic story Bangladesh has to tell. Uncle Selim built the house. Nabila is just trying to afford the coffee.

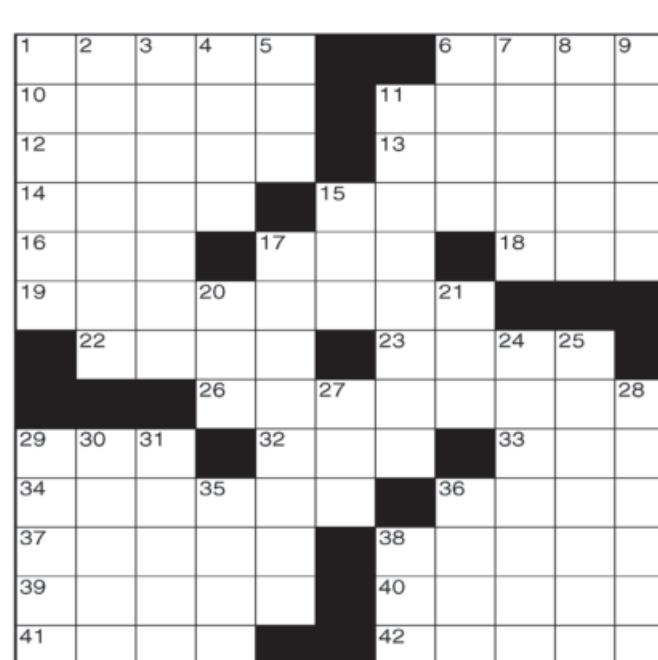
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Skimpy swimwear
6 Forum wear
10 Went fast
11 Roof overhangs
12 Epps and Sharif
13 Enormous
14 Flag waver
15 "Gangsta's Paradise" singer
16 Greek vowel
17 Fitting
18 Church talk: Abbr.
19 Hip-hop star who sounds absurd
22 Duo
23 Revue segment
26 Hip-hop star who sounds paranormal

29 Sauna site
32 ___Vegas
33 "Straight Outta Compton" hip-hop group
34 "The Naked Truth" rapper
36 Eye part
37 Prank
38 Namely
39 Sports figures
40 Disney's mermaid
41 Fast runner
42 Attempt anew
44 Mason's tool
2 Overact
3 Ottawa anthem
4 Bookish sort
5 Merchandise: Abbr.

6 Singer Cruz
7 Squashed circles
8 Wish granter
9 Famed fur tycoon
11 They have big heads
15 EMT's forte
17 Fast-drying paints
20 Goal
21 Go downhill
24 "Told you!"
25 More yellow-brown
27 Frodo's friend
28 In conclusion
29 URL part
30 Ship of 1492
31 Church sight
35 Toy with a tail
36 Folk stories
38 Paving goo



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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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