

#PERSPECTIVE

From self-doubt to Harvard: Lessons for dreamers in Bangladesh

A few weeks ago, I accepted my offer to Harvard Business School's MBA Class of 2028. It still feels surreal to even write this. But this journey didn't begin with an application. It started much earlier, in a traditional Bangladeshi home, with a question I couldn't shake: Is this all there is?

Like many Bangladeshi girls, I grew up with the assumption that my life would eventually narrow into a single destination: marriage. There is nothing wrong with that path, but for me, it felt like a life half-lived. I wanted more: to learn, to build, to contribute.

That urge made me restless. I questioned rules, spoke up when something felt unfair, and constantly struggled to accept beliefs that clashed with my conscience. It made me wonder, am I wrong? Why was it so hard for me to accept that marriage could be the sole purpose of my life? Only later did I understand that what appeared to be defiance was, in fact, an early form of self-awareness and curiosity about my value and purpose in my life, figuring out what and who I want to be.

In university, I finally felt normal when I found friends who, like me, were opinionated, questioned assumptions, were idealistic, occasionally stubborn, and deeply driven by purpose. We debated social problems, discussed everything from entrepreneurial ideas to programming language, and believed that defiant people like us could change the world!

That shared passion led us to an unexpected milestone: winning the regional finale of the world's largest student competition, HULT Prize, in Shanghai when I was 21. Since then, trusting my instincts and daring to "shoot my shot" became habits that quietly shaped my life.

Which brings me, years later, to Harvard Business School.

I will not write about test scores, essays, or recommendation letters, not because they do not matter, but because they are not the heart of the story. Nearly 15,000 people apply to Harvard Business School each year, and about 900 are admitted. What distinguishes them is rarely perfection; it is pattern — a consistency of values lived over time.

First, be willing to write and rewrite your story. It helps to be willing to go against the flow, be someone unafraid of unfamiliar paths.

My first attempt at taking an unfamiliar path was joining the Bangladesh Military Academy after high



school. Two days into training, buzz cut and all, I knew it was not my path. Again, it is a highly pursued profession for many in Bangladesh, just like it was for my father. But it was not a fit for me.

When I left, my platoon commander told me, "You are disgracing yourself." Those words haunted me for years. But I eventually learned this: choosing the wrong path does not mean you must stay on it. Growth often begins with the courage to walk away, reflect, and rewrite your story.

That moment also taught me something essential about leadership and learning. Real growth requires both learning and unlearning; questioning expectations and assumptions handed down by family, society, or fear, and making space for new ideas and perspectives.

In many ways, this is what schools like Harvard look for — not flawless trajectories, but evidence of curiosity, self-awareness, and a leadership philosophy shaped through reflection. Your self-awareness and the rationale behind your career and life choices are the core of what Harvard tests during the MBA interview.

It also helps to become genuinely good at what you do.

Excellence, when sustained, speaks.

Institutions like Harvard value depth, whether that shows up as promotions at work, leadership in your entrepreneurial venture, or becoming a subject matter expert who creates meaningful impact in a unique industry or role.

Passion matters too, especially the kind that keeps returning no matter how busy or tired you are. The things you pursue outside your job, such as leadership roles, community work, social or creative initiatives, are not "extras." They are expressions of conviction. These experiences in your resume will make you stand out as a candidate when you apply for business schools.

Academic credibility plays its role as well. You do not need to be a lifelong top student in class; I certainly was not. But rigorous programs such as IVY League MBAs demand discipline.

Standardised tests such as GRE, GMAT — flawed as they may be, reflect consistency and commitment. Preparing for them alongside a full-time job is, in itself, proof of discipline and focus, which are needed to survive in competitive schools such as Harvard.

More than anything, global-mindedness matters. Harvard Business School curates their class every year, so it consists of leaders representing over 60 countries. Being open to difference and learning from people who think and live differently are crucial values that you must practice in your everyday life to thrive in a global classroom, such as at Harvard.

One of the most humbling lessons I've learned is this: the moment you

believe you are the smartest person in the room is the moment you stop growing.

Finally, I want to speak directly to those of us who grew up in Bangladesh. We are often taught, subtly or explicitly, to see our identity as a limitation. Our passport is weak, we're told. Our systems are flawed. Our odds are stacked. Yet, growing up here also gives us something rare: proximity to reality. We witness inequality, social and generational bottlenecks at home and around us. While others travel across continents seeking "impact experiences," many of us live among opportunities to serve, to lead, and to solve problems every day.

Growing up in Bangladesh gave my character an edge; it helped shape my personality, and I am sure that is true for many of you. Play that to your strength!

Somewhere, someone is reading this while quietly negotiating with their doubts, wondering if they are "enough," if their background is too ordinary, their passport too weak, their dreams too ambitious. If that's you, let me say this: don't reject yourself on behalf of the world. Prepare earnestly. Stay curious. And when the moment comes, take the leap.

Before I end, I want to return to a line I once read: "Dreams are not what you see in your sleep; dreams are what keep you awake." I understand this now more than ever. Even after moving to Canada, earning a master's degree from a top university (University of Toronto), building a career, navigating immigration, and finding stability, I still found myself awake at night, thinking about an unfinished dream. I wanted to sit in a Harvard classroom, to learn from the best, to be shaped into a leader who could create lasting impact.

That restlessness was my answer. It told me it was time.

So, I will leave you with this question: What is the dream that keeps you awake at night?

By Tasneem Omar Ava
Photo: Collected

