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CAMPUS

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How living abroad CHANGES ONE'S RELATIONSHIP *with food*

PHOTO: **ORCHID CHAKMA**

MOVIES

Bhai, power, and the politics in The University of Chankharpul

AZRA HUMAYRA

Filmmakers, like most people, have riveting things to say about what they've seen and endured at close range. This approach places extraordinary strain on the art form. The form demands not only an assertive, even audacious imagination to animate its surfaces, but also a dense substratum of political consciousness and intellectual coherence to keep that imagination from drifting into empty spectacle. *The University of Chankharpul* wins on that front.

Directed by Akash Haque, *The University of Chankharpul* announces itself as a comedy, but its laughter is edged with recognition. Beneath the surface lies a finely observed portrait of public-university life, where the ordinary rhythms of student existence are steadily eclipsed by the intoxicating promise of authority. The film charts the petty stratagems and performative loyalties through which students chase the symbolic power of a post, revealing how ambition and insecurity collude with institutional ritual to elevate the trivial into the tyrannical.

Haque's inspiration emerges from a stark contrast: the nightmarish political claustrophobia of public university dormitories set against the comparatively freer, more open campus culture of Sikkim University, where he completed his master's degree.

Central to the former is the notorious "guest room" culture, along with the ritualised abuse dispensed by senior leaders eager to demonstrate their dominance and curry favour with those above them. These scenes prise open doors long kept shut, compelling viewers to confront a brutality so habitual that it has ceased to shock those who practise it.

One may think that the "aesthetic dogma" propelled the director to cast students from his own institution, but it was a choice driven by financial constraints. Shot entirely in natural light, the film achieves an authenticity that polished contemporary productions often lack. The acting is so persuasive that one quickly forgets these are familiar faces on campus and not trained professionals. Debdyuti Aich, Rocky Khan, Boby Biswas, Akhtaruzzaman Azad, Abu Sayed, Ifad Hasan, Niloy Bala, and other actors shone throughout the entire film.

The textures of student politics are rendered with affectionate precision: garlands piled onto student leaders like sacred offerings, compulsory political programmes attended to "justify" one's place in the hall, the rigid insider–outsider divide, the cruelty of ragging, and the eclipse of intellectual life. Yet these grim realities are smuggled into scenes so comically staged that the audience finds itself laughing even as they wince.

If one listens carefully, every character answers to the same name: *Bhai*. The repetition is deliberate and telling. In Haque's mordant universe, the frequency with which one is called *'bhai'* appears to be directly proportional to one's appetite for power.

The music is deployed with discriminating intelligence, gripping the audience while offering commentary in moments where dialogue falls silent. Politically charged and precisely timed, the soundtracks converse with the images rather than merely accompanying them.

Together with the plot, characters, writing, and setting, they create a rawness so acute it borders on the heartbreaking. This unvarnished intensity renders *The University of Chankharpul* compelling from beginning to end; it captures the tragedy of students chasing a fleeting taste of power at the cost of their own promise, revealing a game that is structurally rigged, morally bewildering, and ultimately self-defeating.

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OFF CAMPUS

WHAT MUSIC LETS US KEEP

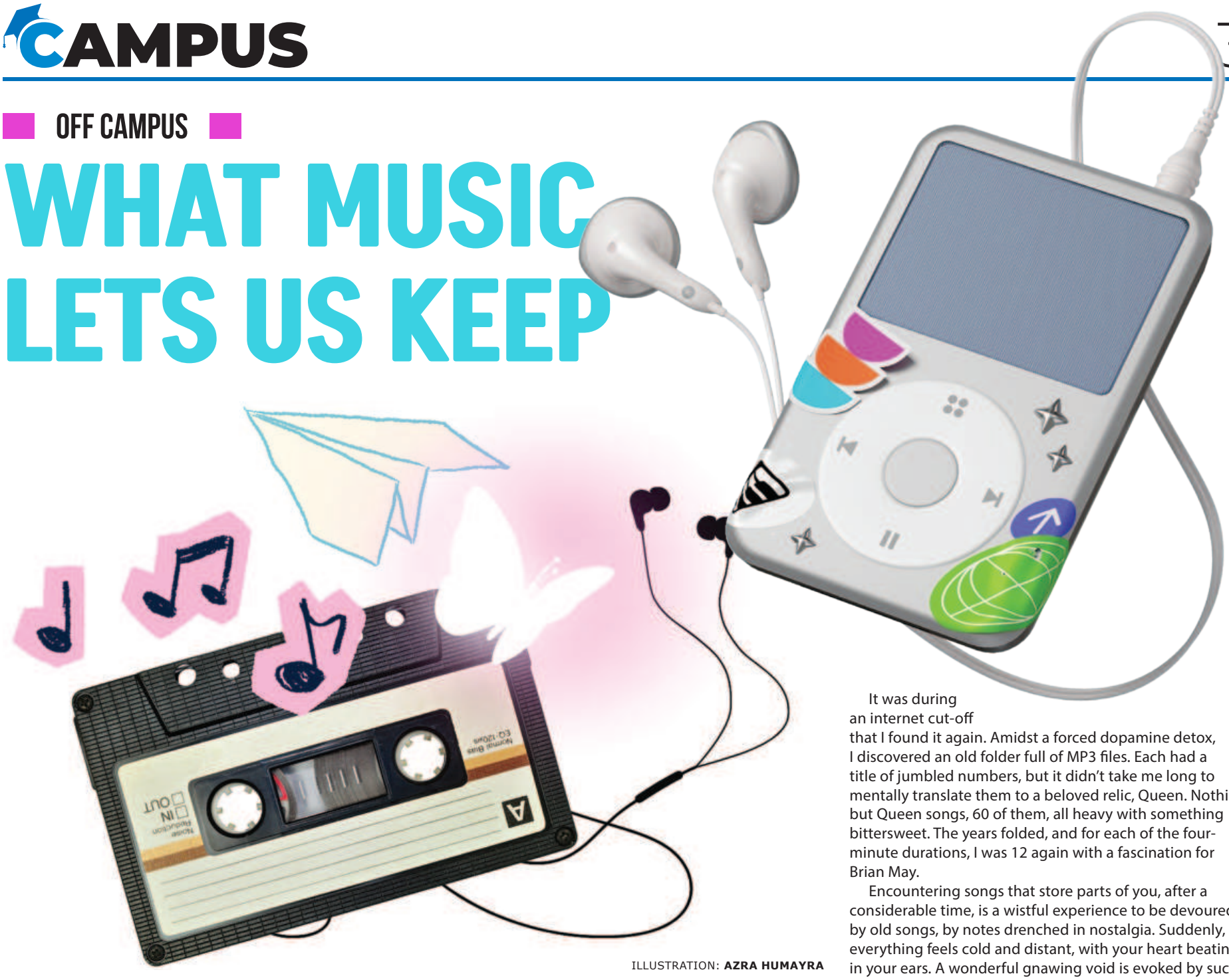


ILLUSTRATION: **AZRA HUMAYRA**

ALEENA YUSRA

The summer of being 12 was the first time I learnt to savour the taste of life through music. It was a blend of ambition and a strong hope that belonging awaited me somewhere in the future. I taught myself to look at my mundane youth through a gaze I shaped with endless playlists filled with Queen songs. Yet time, with its cleverness, found the gaps between my fingers and diluted that summer into a distant dream.

Music has its own way of absorbing moments into its symphony, taking a delicately precise grasp of even the most prosaic sentiments of one's life and creating an artefact of an old, raw soul. It all happens so seamlessly that we remain utterly oblivious to the riveting phenomenon: our present gradually metamorphosing into an intangible, melancholic echo of the past, a peculiar, aching time capsule.

Looking back at the days of your childhood is a mixture of hollow loveliness and estrangement. It sometimes feels far, blurry, and fragile, like reminiscing over a completely different person who used to be you. Like everything cherished and longed after, childhood days have a golden dust settled over them — the kind that only falls on things you can never quite return to. In the endless haze of this human transience, all we can do is hold the arts of our "then" and "now" close to our hearts.

For most of my time after that summer, I spent it in retrospect. Everything used to feel larger than it was, and I was unaware that things wouldn't always be like this. Some days, I even tried living through it once more with futile attempts. I found a new, more present loveliness in music once again, but it was different. Something vast and invisible had changed. I felt myself grow up, the golden age of rock turned into shoegaze, and there was no honey-softened edge, just solid reality.

It was during an internet cut-off that I found it again. Amidst a forced dopamine detox, I discovered an old folder full of MP3 files. Each had a title of jumbled numbers, but it didn't take me long to mentally translate them to a beloved relic, Queen. Nothing but Queen songs, 60 of them, all heavy with something bittersweet. The years folded, and for each of the four-minute durations, I was 12 again with a fascination for Brian May.

Encountering songs that store parts of you, after a considerable time, is a wistful experience to be devoured by old songs, by notes drenched in nostalgia. Suddenly, everything feels cold and distant, with your heart beating in your ears. A wonderful gnawing void is evoked by such songs, longing and yearning. As the smoke of memories threatens to dissipate, we race against our minds, striving to hold onto the blurred fragments of what once was.

The song ended. The room came back (though the internet did not). I sat there with my hands on the keyboard, a little older than I was a few minutes ago and much older than I was allowed to be inside the music. It doesn't make me 12 again; it only reminds me that I once was.

Music, however magical, doesn't resurrect the past or bring back what we lost. There is something merciful in being allowed to remember so vividly, in learning to live with time instead of trying to defeat it. Perhaps that is and always has been enough from one of humanity's most beautiful creations: to remember, to ache and to keep going with something golden still ringing in our ears.

Aleena is a struggling 9th grader who loves robots and revolutions. Send her your esoteric online archives at aleenayusra33@gmail.com.

PHOTOS: SAZZAD IBNE SAYED

OFF CAMPUS

How living abroad changes your relationship with food

The struggle isn't just in cooking; it's also in sourcing ingredients. Stores selling Bangladeshi staples are rare, and the few that exist charge marked-up prices to offset import fees. And so, the humble lentil or spice you once overlooked becomes a small luxury worth seeking out.

ZARA ZUBAYER

The moment we step far away from home, the real world forces us to confront everything we once took for granted. Often treated as an afterthought, food becomes one of the most significant and unexpected aspects of culture shock for those living abroad.

The realisation often comes through the most minuscule details. Whether it's the texture of rice or the blend of spices, one suddenly becomes hyperaware of how "foreign" even the simplest foods taste. *Cha* becomes tea, and you spend the extra ten minutes boiling tea bags to recreate the strong, fragrant aroma of *cha* that reminds you of Bangladesh. Since childhood, many of us grow tired of the familiar *bhaat, daal,* and *lebu* combination. Yet, once deprived of the flavours of home, we begin to crave what we once wrinkled our noses at.

Farhanul Azim, a Bangladeshi student studying at the University of Texas at Arlington, shares the same sentiment: "I managed to cook the basics after three months of living in the US—rice and beef curry. When I invited a fellow Bangladeshi student to share the meal with me, he looked as though he was on the verge of tears. It had been many months since he had tasted homemade food."

Distance has a way of turning indifference towards our everyday bites into longing. It also has a way of pushing people towards independence in all aspects, even learning the intricacies of cooking. There's also a familiar scene: parents answering midnight calls from children overseas, trying to perfect recipes that no YouTube tutorial seems to get just right.

The struggle isn't just in cooking; it's also in sourcing ingredients. Stores selling Bangladeshi staples are rare, and the few that exist charge marked-up prices to offset import fees. And so, the humble lentil or spice you once overlooked becomes a small luxury worth seeking out. Even something as routine as meat can become a struggle. Halal meat, so easily found at home, is often scarce overseas. Students spend hours hunting speciality stores, paying premium prices, or ordering online, learning that cooking a proper curry involves more than just spices.

Another challenge for individuals living away from home is navigating Ramadan away from family. Sourcing meals, along with juggling university or work life that doesn't accommodate iftar hours, can be difficult and time-consuming. In many parts of the world, mosques play a hospitable role in hosting free iftars during Ramadan. In the UK, for example, the East London Mosque and London Muslim Centre provide free iftar accommodations during Ramadan to students, refugees, and others in need.

As challenging as it is to find halal food abroad, Bangladeshi cuisine is also deeply under-represented in the Western world. Lost in translation and buried under Indian or generic South Asian labels, Bangladesh's rich culinary heritage is reduced to *biryani,samosas*, and an oversimplified label of "curry", erasing the depth of its flavours.

Tasnuva Tabassum, a programme manager at Google and the creator of the Instagram food blog *BanglaCook_US*, shares her experience as a Bangladeshi living in California: "After 16 years living outside of Bangladesh, I've realised that the dishes I used to see as 'ordinary' are actually treasures. My memory will randomly trigger a craving for something simple—like *lal shaak* or *lau*—and suddenly, I am on a total scavenger hunt for replacement ingredients. It's funny how a stir-fried spinach dish from my childhood can send me across three different grocery stores just to get the flavour exactly right."

As there's a plethora of Indian and Middle Eastern restaurants strewn all across the world, non-Bangladeshis are naturally more familiar with those flavours. In comparison, there are very few establishments known to serve authentic Bangladeshi food.

To introduce Bangladeshi culinary traditions to her community, Tasnuva started hosting tasting menus at her home. "I felt it was a disservice to our heritage to see our flavours 'hiding' rather than standing proud," she says. "This prompted me to start hosting Bangladeshi tasting menus at my home in California. By sharing the stories and childhood roots behind every dish with my guests, I want to show that our food isn't just a subset of something else—it's a unique, historical fusion of global influences that deserves its own identity and its own spotlight."

Building on efforts like Tasnuva's tasting menus, social media has also vibrantly become a space where our cuisine is reclaiming its voice. Platforms like *Spice Bangla*, *Spicy Bengali Bites*, and many other Bangladeshi food vloggers on YouTube and Instagram have introduced global audiences to dishes rarely seen on restaurant menus abroad. These creators do what Western food spaces often fail to do: they show Bangladeshi food as it is lived and eaten, not watered down or rebranded for convenience.

In the European food scene, a Stockholm-based Bangladeshi chef offered insight into introducing Bengali cuisine to Western audiences. Nahid Hassan, owner of the restaurant chain "Shanti", began his journey with the goal of bringing Bangladeshi culture and food into the mainstream.

"The Swedes accept our cuisine with enthusiasm—even the spice," Hassan says. "The first thing I introduced my guests to was our authentic *daal*, then *fuchka* and *chotpoti*, because I miss the street food of my home country. I also introduced *halim*. These are simple foods, but my guests loved them."

Reflecting on his bond with native cuisine, Hassan added, "There are raw emotions attached to Bangladeshi food. I don't critique Indian food—they have great food—but we feel a particular sentiment with our spices and the flavour of *shorisha*. After I started my journey, more Bangladeshis felt inspired to open their own restaurants, including several in Stockholm."

Hassan's work goes beyond food alone; it extends to crafting a cultural experience for first-time diners. In one of his restaurants, "Gossip"—named after the mischievous spirit of a Bangladeshi adda—sounds of Dhaka's traffic play along the path to the restrooms: the chime of *rickshaw* bells, the impatient car honks, and the never-ending bickering and buzz of the city. While the chaos feels oddly therapeutic to Bangladeshis, it offers a strikingly new experience for those unfamiliar with the country's energetic streets.

Living away from Bangladesh also highlights the generational gap in how we see and cook our food. First-generation immigrants, those who moved as adults, carry recipes like a kind of memory. For them, cooking isn't just about feeding a family; it's about preserving home. A pinch of turmeric, the exact simmer for lentils, the hearty smell of mustard seeds popping in oil—they know it by instinct. In a foreign kitchen, every dish becomes a way to hold onto tradition, to bring a little piece of Bangladesh into a new world.

Students and younger generations, on the other hand, often experience a more fragmented relationship with these flavours. Moving from the country at a younger age, they learn to navigate kitchens and markets that don't cater to their tastes. Many relearn recipes through trial-and-error or end up curating a fusion of whatever is at hand. There's a tension between convenience and authenticity: a store-bought curry paste or online ingredient substitute can never fully match the home-cooked original.

So, food not only bridges the gap among nationalities but also between generations. Parents preserve recipes as a way of keeping their culture alive, while children relearn them as an act of identity reclamation.

Although Dhaka serves as the central hub for food variety, other regions also play a substantial role in contributing to the diversity of the Bangladeshi culinary landscape. Each division has its own speciality: the seasonal *pithas* and the different ways of preparing curries or rice, from regional fish dishes to slow-cooked meats and sweets rooted in local produce and tradition. All this diversity is often flattened into the vague label of "Asian food", a category that barely begins to capture the depth of our cuisine. Living overseas makes this erasure more noticeable; it encourages a deeper appreciation for the nuances and richness that are often overlooked.

Distance, in that sense, reshapes our relationship with food. What once felt ordinary begins to carry weight, turning everyday dishes into markers of memory and nostalgia. Distance also makes the heart grow fonder: for warm food, warmer company, and everything you leave behind.

Zara Zubayer is a half-pianist, occasional grandma (she knits), and collector of instruments she never learns. Suggest a new hobby she won't commit to at zarazubayer1@gmail.com

HOW BANGLADESHI STUDENTS ABROAD MEET THEIR DESHI FOOD CRAVINGS

When I first arrived in the US, I avoided attending dawats at the homes of close relatives. But over time, I began to miss home, especially our food. One Eid, I accepted an invitation to a family friend's house, and it turned out to be one of the best decisions I ever made. The biryani, mutton, eggplant, and beef they served reminded me of home. After that, I never skipped a dawat. And the best part was when my hosts kindly packed some of the leftovers for me.

- Riaz Mahboob, a graduate of University of Texas at Austin, USA

Living in Canada as a Bangladeshi student, my strongest feeling of homesickness is tied to food. Some evenings, I crave the rich spice of biryani or the comfort of warm khichuri like we have back in Dhaka. I visit local deshi restaurants or cook with friends, filling the kitchen with familiar aromas, but it's never quite the same. However, in every bite, I feel closer to home, like Bangladesh is never too far away.

- Nishat Jahan, University of Waterloo, Canada

I prefer to cook deshi meals at home. I don't eat outside often because I think it's overpriced. The biggest issue of Bangladeshi restaurants in my area is that they cater their spice level to that of British people. Some things do not taste as good unless they are a bit spicy.
I have also gotten good at cooking the basic dishes like chicken curry, daal, alu bhorta and bhaji. After many attempts, I was finally able to make daal that tasted like my mom's. I cried while eating it.

- Maleeha Muniyat, University of Portsmouth, UK

OPINION

Are economics curricula in universities losing their HUMANE ASPECT?

Economics curricula – all over the world – are seemingly isolating themselves from the entities that shape reality, leaving students unaware of how significant these forces really are.

BIPRA PRASUN DAS

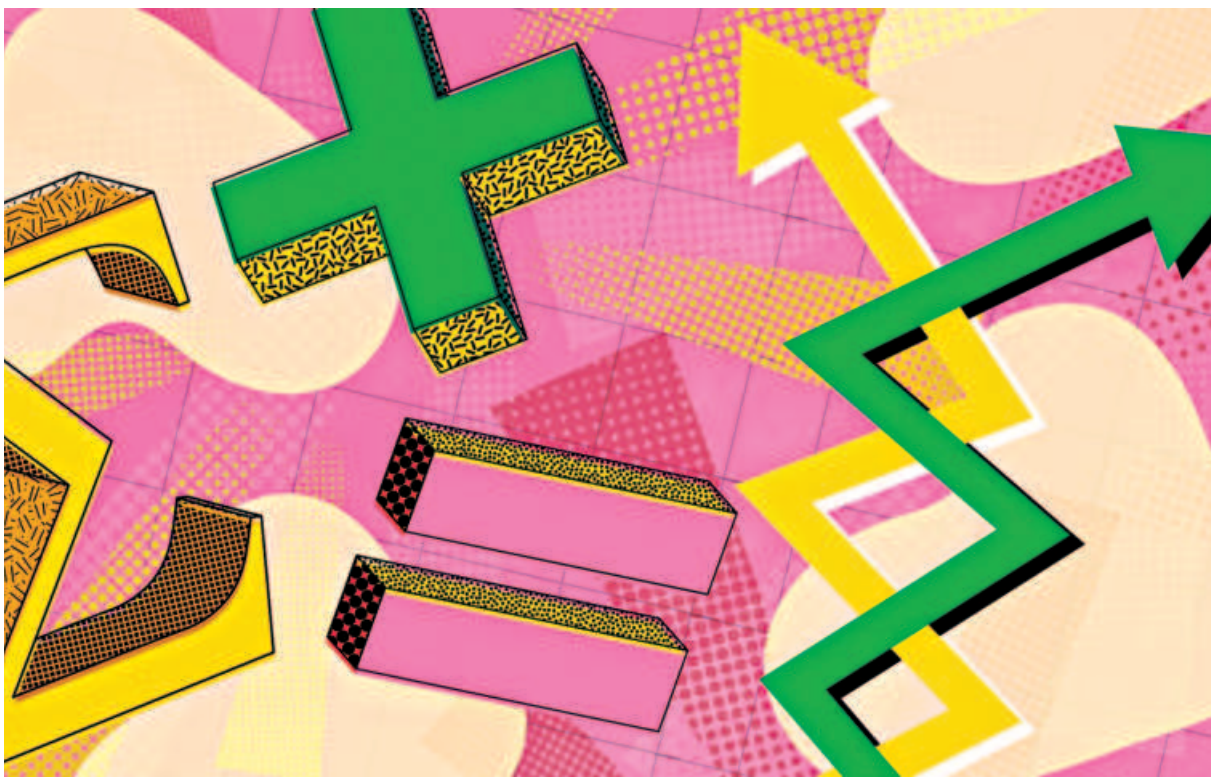


ILLUSTRATION: **ABIR HOSSAIN**

Walk into an economics classroom at a university today, and you will likely encounter impressive technical sophistication. Students are mathematically savvy; they can manipulate large datasets, estimate complex econometric models, and solve optimisation problems. Despite their skills, there remains a gap. The problem is not a lack of intelligence or effort, but a curriculum that has drifted away from the human realities economics is meant to serve.

Over the past few decades, economics departments have increasingly modelled themselves after the natural sciences. Mathematical rigour, formal modelling, and statistical techniques now dominate the curriculum, mainly because these tools are highly valued in a data-driven world. The absence of such skills would significantly reduce employment opportunities for the average economics graduate. Yet, this shift has not come without a cost. Economics has gradually been separated from history, politics, and the humanities more broadly.

This tension is increasingly acknowledged from within the profession itself. Nobel laureate Angus Deaton penned an essay titled "Rethinking My Economics", where he elaborated on the many mechanisms that economics tends to overlook. "We get little training about the ends of economics, on the meaning of well-being—welfare economics has long since vanished from the curriculum—or on what philosophers say about equality," he writes.

Similarly, another Nobel laureate, Paul Romer, has criticised the field's reliance on what he terms "mathiness"—the use of mathematical formalism to create an illusion of scientific rigour while obscuring weak assumptions or ideological commitments. These critiques point to a deeper problem: economics education has become highly technical but intellectually narrow.

A striking feature of contemporary economics teaching is the lack of theoretical diversity. Neoclassical economics dominates introductory and advanced courses alike, often presented not as one framework among many, but as the framework. According to the 2024 "Is Economics Education Fit for the 21st Century?" report by Rethinking Economics, over 88 percent of theory modules in surveyed UK universities focus exclusively on mainstream neoclassical approaches. Alternative traditions, such as post-Keynesian, institutional, Marxist, feminist, and ecological economics, are marginal at best, if they appear at all. The dominance of a single economic theory hinders students' grasp of complex realities.

Neoclassical models, which rely on rational, self-interested individuals in competitive markets, are often analytically helpful but empirically weak. Their limitations become clear during financial crises, persistent inequality, or environmental degradation. Without alternative frameworks, students lack the necessary intellectual tools to critique or move beyond these failures.

The dominance of mathematical modelling reinforces this tunnel vision. Quantitative methods are essential, but their elevation to the status of ultimate truth has consequences. Economics students are rarely trained in qualitative research, historical analysis, or institutional study. If something cannot be easily measured, it is often treated as secondary. Culture, power, norms, and lived experience fade into the background.

Ethics is one of the first casualties of this approach. Classical economists once saw their work as inseparable from moral philosophy. Today, in many economics curricula around the world, welfare is typically reduced to efficiency, often defined through concepts like "Pareto optimality". These tools can tell us whether resources are being allocated efficiently, but they cannot tell us whether outcomes are fair, humane, or just.

History, too, has been pushed aside. Many economics graduates leave university with little understanding of how colonialism, slavery, and empire shaped the global economy they are studying. The Rethinking Economics report found that more than half of the surveyed universities offered no meaningful teaching on these topics. Without this context, global inequality can appear natural or accidental rather than historically produced.

This absence has serious implications. Trade theories that celebrate comparative advantage rarely grapple with the fact that many of these "advantages" were forged through coercion and extraction. Development economics often focuses on institutional failure in the Global South while ignoring the historical processes that undermined those institutions in the first place. An economics education without history risks mistaking inherited injustice for market efficiency.

Nowhere are these limitations more dangerous than in the treatment of the environment. Climate change is arguably the defining economic challenge of our time, yet ecological thinking remains marginal in most economics departments. Environmental issues are usually framed as "externalities"—side effects that can be corrected by pricing carbon or adjusting incentives.

These tools are useful, but they are not enough. Ecological economics starts from a more uncomfortable premise: the economy is not separate from nature but embedded within it. It is constrained by physical limits, planetary boundaries, and irreversible ecological damage. Endless growth on a finite planet is not just undesirable; it is impossible. Yet students can and do complete an economics degree without ever seriously engaging with these ideas.

Economics shapes policy, and policy shapes lives. In a world facing climate breakdown, democratic erosion, and widening inequality, we cannot afford an economics education that is brilliant with numbers but blind to humanity. For this reason, economics must be taught in tandem with the other social sciences.

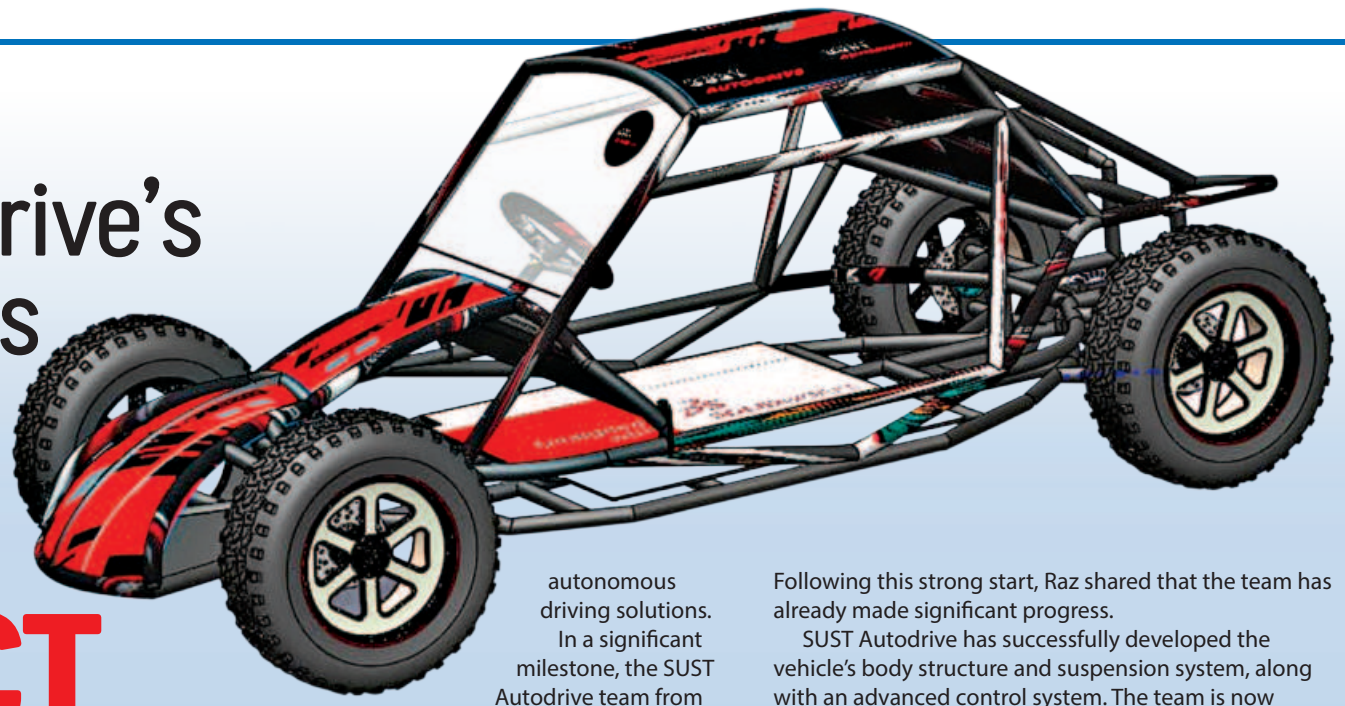
There are signs of movement. Projects like CORE Econ have updated introductory courses to reflect inequality, history, and environmental limits. Student movements such as "Rethinking Economics" have forced departments to confront uncomfortable questions about what they teach and why. But institutional resistance remains strong, especially in research incentives that reward technical conformity over intellectual breadth. Contemporary economics academia disproportionately rewards technical rigour compared to qualitative research.

If universities continue to prioritise technical elegance over real-world relevance, they risk producing economists who are highly skilled yet profoundly disconnected from the societies they serve. If economics is to become a truly relevant and responsive social science, university curricula must reclaim the diversity that once defined the discipline.

Bipra Prasun Das studies Economics at North South University

OFF CAMPUS

SUST Autodrive's autonomous CAR PROJECT



SAIMOON SAKI

Road safety remains a major concern in Bangladesh, with many accidents linked to driver error and poorly maintained vehicles. As countries around the world adopt autonomous technologies to improve transportation safety, it is time for Bangladesh to seriously invest in researching and developing autonomous driving solutions.

In a significant milestone, the SUST Autodrive team from Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) has introduced one of the country's first self-driving car prototypes. The project began with the growing interest of Abul Bashar Raz, an undergraduate student of SUST's Mechanical Engineering department, in robotics and automation. Aware that Bangladesh is falling behind in the global shift toward autonomous systems – widely viewed as the future of transportation – he recognised the urgent need for innovation in areas such as autonomous port operations and factory automation.

That's when Raz started researching self-driving cars, which he found to be the most advanced and comprehensive form of autonomous technology. Raz believed that mastering self-driving technology would lay the foundation for developing other automation solutions, since many of its core technologies could be adapted and applied across multiple fields.

In his third year, Raz realised he needed a team, so he reached out to friends from different departments. They began their journey with no funding but plenty of ambition. In 2024, their dedication helped them raise BDT 2 lakh on their own, giving the project its first real boost and turning their vision into a working reality.

Following this strong start, Raz shared that the team has already made significant progress.

SUST Autodrive has successfully developed the vehicle's body structure and suspension system, along with an advanced control system. The team is now preparing to conduct manual testing of the car by July. Currently, they are focused on raising funds to complete the sensor setup and computing unit, which are critical components for testing the autonomous software on the roads of Sylhet city.

"Our team has been working tirelessly to optimise our software and algorithms for the complex and often unpredictable road conditions of Bangladesh," Raz noted. "We're hoping to make history by testing Bangladesh's first autonomous vehicle by June 2026."

Other than that, the SUST Autodrive team also managed to make their way to several local and international competitions, including the "Bosch Future Mobility Challenge 2026" and "Roboracer". They also had the chance to showcase their main prototype car model on behalf of their department at the International Conference on Engineering Research, Innovation and Education (ICERIE) 2025. Last November, SUST Autodrive also won the "Shaheed Tanvin Innovation Award" at Innoverse Bangladesh 2025 held at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET).

SUST Autodrive's autonomous car project is widely regarded as the first of its kind in Bangladesh. While Raz acknowledges that teams from other universities have worked on individual aspects of autonomous vehicle technology, he emphasised that SUST Autodrive is the first to develop a full-scale, multi-dimensional autonomous car project entirely from scratch.

PHOTOS: **SUST AUTODRIVE**

EDUCATION

The English-medium student's public university ADMISSION TEST DILEMMA

PHOTO: **ORCHID CHAKMA**

ZARA ZUBAYER

There's a palpable unease in the months after finishing your A level exams. In addition to receiving their high school diploma, some students also receive a ticket to the chaotic journey to public university exams. Securing a seat at institutions like Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), Dhaka University (DU), or the country's leading medical colleges is an ambitious dream for many English-medium candidates. While some gear up for the admission exams with determination, many step into the process underestimating what it really takes to secure a rank in these prestigious universities.

I was one of those people: dismissive, naive, and overconfident in my abilities.

Behind the multitude of examinees are competitive parents who serve as the driving force throughout the process. Starting from the hunt for home tutors and Facebook groups exchanging academic resources to racing for spots at coaching centres, these guardians have the whole agenda planned. Conversations with parents during this time often include examples of a niece or nephew who miraculously cracked the secret code to attaining public university prestige.

While parents mean to be harmlessly encouraging, it's also easy to feel pressured when you're being constantly compared academically. During this time, you inevitably forget to ask yourself, "Am I ready for this?"

As the public entrance exams are held under the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), English-medium students often feel like fish out of water when they begin preparing. Their most common observation is that the board relies heavily on memorisation, an approach they weren't accustomed to.

"We were expected to memorise things like the periodic table for chemistry, which I had never needed to do at A levels. Memorisation took away time from actually practising concepts," said Shaira Paromita, an examinee with an English-medium background, who sat for DU's Science unit, better known as the "A unit" admission test.

Rewiring your brain to learn an entirely new education system in the span of months requires extreme dedication and strong will. The way I studied my entire life was to understand, practise, and apply. As classes continued in the coaching centre I was enrolled in, my eagerness to continue began to falter. Mathematics wasn't just solving problems; it was also having to recall pages of extensive formula derivations.

At coaching classes, the teachers often stated that they wouldn't be able to cover a lot of content due to a lack of time. The solution they offered for this was to memorise every book line by line, which I found impractical. There were very few people in class who questioned the methods, studying with the immense passion that I failed to develop. At the same time, my parents eagerly awaited my mock test scores to improve, and the fear of disappointing them motivated me to try harder.

A few months into the preparation, the classroom began to slowly empty out. A portion of the coaching batch left after A level results were published, being unable to qualify to sit for the entrance exams. A few weeks later, despite qualifying myself, I made the choice not to take any entrance exams. It was a decision born not out of rebellion, but of desperation. After a long period of denial, I realised that following the crowd was not a requirement. I may have had the ability to push through with enough effort, but I was no longer willing to keep myself under constant pressure. For the first time in my life, I was putting in the effort without seeing any real improvement or success.

Although I had doubts before I quit, accounts of English-medium candidates who actually sat for the exam also gave me new perspectives. A previous candidate who sat for the medical exam in 2024 shared their experience: "I studied rigorously for the medical admission test (MAT), often feeling that it was unfair that NCTB students had a head start, as they were familiar with the curriculum. The probability of getting in was already halved due to the newness of the material. It was like chasing an impossible dream."

These discussions often raise questions about fairness. Shifting from the British or international curriculum to suddenly covering two years' worth of the NCTB syllabus in just a few months can be overwhelming, and English-medium students are frequently at a disadvantage. Many wish to pursue medical colleges or other reputed institutions in Bangladesh, not necessarily abroad. If fairness is the goal, the system could consider aligning public university exams more closely with students' educational backgrounds. Beyond policy, it's also a reminder of how challenging the path can be for those navigating between two different worlds of learning.

While these systemic challenges affect every student, the experience is always personal. For me, reconnecting with fellow candidates who had also decided not to go through with it gave a sense of comfort and recognition. "It was the right decision for me. Passing public exams is not an impossible task, but it was impractical for me to master two completely different curricula with little overlap," says previous BUET aspirant Mehrak Mizan. He continued, "I achieved three A* for Physics, Chemistry, and Mathematics in my A levels, but ultimately it was the syllabus differences that kept me from proceeding further."

This broadens the narrative that even straight-A students can struggle to keep up with the intensity and resilience the preparation demands. The journey highlighted the sharp divide between the English medium and NCTB learning styles, showing just how academically and emotionally challenging the path towards public university admission can be.

Looking back**,** taking that step allowed me to regain control over my own path. The weight of expectations that had once felt unbearable started to loosen its hold. I could focus on learning in ways that suited me and rediscover my academic enthusiasm without the constant shadow of comparison. For the first time in months, I felt a sense of relief from being able to move at a pace on my terms.

Zara Zubayer is a half-pianist, occasional grandma (she knits), and collector of instruments she never learns. Suggest a new hobby she won't commit to at zarazubayer1@gmail.com