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RISING STARS

FOR YOUNG MINDS ON THE RISE

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Carrying the weight of having strict parents

PHOTO: **ORCHID CHAKMA**

READER SUBMISSION

Inside a young numismatist's COLLECTION

A young collector's quest to preserve the metallic heritage of the Bengal region

RAFAAD KARIM

My journey into the world of numismatics began when I was eight years old. Armed with my *salami* and accompanied by my parents, I began exploring the small, dusty antique shops tucked away in different parts of Dhaka. On my ninth birthday, my father gifted me my first gold coin: a tiny "Fanam" from the era of Tipu Sultan. Soon after, my grandfather gave me a unique, square-shaped five *paisa* from the early days of independent Bangladesh.

My collection began to grow, moving from common alloys to rare gold, silver, and copper. One of my most prized pieces was a gift from my mother—a gold medallion of the Bengal Presidency.

Through my research, I discovered it was struck in the 18th century under Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II.

Today, my collection is a physical timeline of our wonderful region. I have catalogued pieces from the Gupta and Pala dynasties, the Bengal Sultanate, the Mughal Empire, British India, and the East Pakistan period, leading up to modern-day Bangladesh.

I now spend my time following global auction houses and online forums to exchange knowledge with collectors worldwide. Each time I add a rare coin to my album, I feel like I am preserving a small piece of our history.

The author is a 10-year-old numismatist and history enthusiast based in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

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DID YOU KNOW?

Farming, the Industrial Revolution, and the fragility of our teeth

RISING STARS DESK

In a study by *Nature Genetics* published in 2013, the impacts of dietary changes on our ancestors' teeth were unearthed, a phenomenon that was equal parts intriguing and devastating. The research suggests that the dietary changes which emerged due to the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century, as well as the advent of agriculture many years before that, led to an epidemic of tooth decay and gum disease.

The human mouth is home to a wide variety of microbes. Not all are helpful, of course; some actually pose danger. Given how our dietary intake has evolved, with an inclination to consume more starch and sugar, our mouths have become breeding grounds for bacteria-causing species to thrive. Alongside high rates of cavities and plaque, we are also more likely to have misaligned teeth that require orthodontic treatment or surgery. Even though our ancestors were not beholden to the miracles of modern dentistry advancements, there is a good chance they might have had better teeth than we do.

Early adaptation of wheat and barley into the human diet following the beginning of farming caused the oral ecosystem to change. It gave way for gum-disease-causing species to flourish. Likewise, when processed sugar and flour became an important part of our nutritional intake following the Industrial revolution, the ecosystem shifted once more. This time it favoured decay-causing species.

In tandem with these advancements, another noteworthy development unfolded: plummeting diversity in the oral ecosystem. There simply aren't as many species living in our mouths as there used to be. Nonetheless, greater biodiversity is associated with healthy, resilient ecosystems, which could explain why we have seen a surge of dental disease in the modern age. A narrow range of microbes makes our teeth more vulnerable to invasions by species that cause disease, cavities, and other dental problems.

To understand why some of the most integral advancements in the history of humanity led to the collective deterioration of our teeth, we must turn to evolutionary medicine. Our bodies are best acclimatised to the environment in which we as a species have spent most time, not the one we have created for ourselves today. As such, natural selection has not been able to keep up with the leaps that human culture has hurled itself towards and the innovations—such as farming—that it has devised. This is a solid case of evolutionary mismatch. Archaeological evidence reveals that cavities were rare in humans until the beginning of the Neolithic period, some 6,000 years ago.

The book *What Teeth Reveal About Human Evolution* further notes that, nearly all throughout human history, our ancestors consumed foods that were hunted or gathered. This is in stark contrast to our dietary habits that can be characterised by soft, processed and sugary foods, which are unlike the diets for which our teeth are adapted. But because our dietary habits are relatively recent, we do not possess the ability to deal with an influx of sugar and starch, making us vulnerable to the perils of dental disease. It is also worth noting that advances in the field of dentistry occurred in conjunction with changes in our food habits.

On your next visit to the dentist, when they inevitably berate you for your poor dental habits, remember that the fault isn't entirely yours. Regardless of who or what might be to blame, it is the dentist who will most likely make a pretty penny at your expense.

EXPLAINED

Is the AI bubble too big to pop?

ZIBA MAHDI

Bubbles have an interesting characteristic: countdowns to their collapse usually begin before they've even finished inflating. Perhaps it's residual fear from recent history. It wasn't too long ago that the dot-com bubble ballooned and crashed spectacularly, leaving thousands of companies flattened in its wake.

The Gartner Hype Cycle is a graphical model that estimates new technology's maturity, adoption, and social application over time with each stage having a memorable name: Technology Trigger, Peak of Inflated Expectations, Trough of Disillusionment, Slope of Enlightenment, and Plateau of Productivity. According to the 2025 Hype Cycle, generative artificial intelligence was in the Trough of Disillusionment and AI agents were at the Peak of Inflated Expectations. This is a warning that the tech is already losing its shine while the next wave of promises is still cresting.

We can draw parallels of the ongoing AI bubble and the dot-com era, with both meeting bubble metrics like hype-driven valuations, investment per employee, and market concentration. History suggests that a market correction will follow, but there are just enough differences for optimists to claim that the situation is similar, but not the same. Unlike the internet boom of the late 90s, AI growth is backed by well-known, profitable entities with solid earnings, inflation is stubbornly higher, and most importantly, AI is already integrated and yielding productivity gains in several industries.

Ironically, this comprehensive integration is also what makes the risk of the bubble popping too consequential to ignore. The numbers are overwhelming; Big Tech is projected to spend USD 650 billion on AI infrastructure this year. However, the resource-hungry nature of AI means pouring immense capital into it alone does not ensure success or sustainability. The planned infrastructures are already straining labour, chip production, and energy supplies. While data centres have started their expansion, their popularity proportionally has started going downhill. The centres are famous for their massive water consumption, and nobody wants their neighbourhood drained and electricity bills surging. Concerns persist about whether the actual returns on these massive investments will justify the expense. Capital expenditure outpacing revenue generation is precisely when bubbles come to form.

The argument for a bubble existing becomes harder to deny when OpenAI CEO Sam Altman himself suggested that there is one. When the person most incentivised to deny the existence of a bubble acknowledges it, it is a signal worth analysing. For peripheral economies, these signals should trigger alarm bells.

Bangladesh is still in the lower end of AI readiness, as tech literacy remains restricted to urban and digitally privileged groups. This won't insulate it from the fallout, though. Countries at this stage won't feel the sharp loss of overvalued assets, but they will definitely feel the foundations of their digital economic growth eroding. Institutions which have been routing increasing volumes of development finance toward digital infrastructure will shrink their commitments when the global appetite for "digital transformation" cools down.

The most severe threat will be indirect but also quite predictable. In March, it was reported that Bangladesh's merchandise exports fell for the seventh consecutive month in February. Further impediments posed by global oil shocks will cause significant hits. Most consumers will reduce their discretionary spending on apparel in a tech-driven recession in the West. With the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector accounting for most of the nation's export earnings, it could be a sign of a tumultuous period.

Trade bearing the brunt of the impact has historical precedent, as can be demonstrated by how Bangladesh's economy reacted to the worldwide financial crisis in 2008. The more direct victims of an AI reckoning would be the IT sector, particularly the freelance workforce and computer science majors who are getting priced out of their own field.

It's worth noting that bubbles don't always "pop"; sometimes they "deflate". Big Tech monopolies have funded most of the AI infrastructure until now, not banks, making a broad financial collapse improbable. AI is also increasingly becoming a national security asset and reinventing modern warfare to the point where governments have incentives to subsidise them. In the deflation scenario, a recession will simply be a controllable market correction. The difference between a pop and a deflation is largely a matter of speed and severity, not of immunity. The uncertainty itself remains the pressing policy problem.

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PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

COVER STORY

Carrying the weight of having strict parents

ZARA ZUBAYER

The first time my mother discovered my teenage shenanigans, I was mortified. She had pieced together the puzzle from my unusual behaviour—distracted eyes during conversations, the constant magnetic grip on my phone, and an air of secrecy that had never made its presence known before. She didn't say a word and simply turned back around to her routine of household chores, her gold bangles clinking resonantly amongst our uncomfortable silence. The word "taboo" finally took on a definition for me at this moment, and I understood that we'd never really have the confrontation for this particular *conflict*.

As complex as it sounds, there is a strange comfort in our parents' rage. Growing up with strict parents often follows a familiar, almost predictable pattern: rules are enforced, rules are broken, and punishment inevitably follows. Anger, in that sense, is expected; it is loud, immediate, and oddly reassuring in its consistency. But when you truly mess up, their disappointment cuts far deeper than anger ever could, and it lingers in a way that leaves a quiet, lasting ache.

These moments complicate what should be very human experiences. What many parents fail to realise is that the stricter the environment, the more likely their children are to lead double lives. Most of us have seen the "A gentle child at home, so sweet and mild, but out the door they run completely wild" persona in our friends and sometimes even within our own families. Some of us have lived it.

Saima*, a university student, shares her experience: "For the longest time, I felt like a hypocrite. At home, I'd share my parents' dislike of tight-fitting clothes, conservative beliefs, and phobia of boys. But outside, I was completely different. I believed in wearing what you want and being who you are. The more I was restricted from hangouts and outings with friends, the sneakier I became in finding my way—sometimes even putting myself in unsafe situations."

The conversation reminded me of a girl I knew at school, with an admirable dedication to her way of life. She carried a backpack filled with clothes, jewellery, and make-up she wasn't allowed to wear at home. She lived far away and often stayed at friends' houses to attend coaching. Right before her father picked her up, I would watch her wipe off her lipstick, pull her school uniform over her outfit, and tie her long hair back into a tight, neat bun. By the time she got into the car, she looked exactly like the daughter he believed her to be.

As consultant psychologist Jinat Jahan of Mindspace, a Bangladesh-based mental health organisation that provides counselling and support services, explains, "When strictness is based on fear and punishment, it can reduce open communication. Teenagers may begin to hide their actions—not out of rebellion, but as a way to protect themselves from judgment or punishment." She adds that this can also affect how young people relate socially: "If they have not experienced open dialogue at home, it can be difficult to express opinions or navigate relationships comfortably. Some may become withdrawn, while others may develop people-pleasing tendencies."

For a parent, strictness is almost a calling. It creates the sense that who you are and who you will become can be shaped through control over education, clothing, values, and even something as small as a hairstyle. From the perspective of a teenager, however, it rarely leads to immediate discipline. When that control becomes too tight, it often pushes them towards risky behaviour without guidance, rather than away from it.

My sister and I have given innumerable mini heart attacks to our mother, each one introducing her to a new version of motherhood that comes with raising two teenagers. Growing up in conservative families can often mean tiptoeing around certain topics, and "boys" were always one of them. In South Asian culture, dating is often not openly discussed, even among adults. It stems from a mix of fear, discomfort, and the generational and societal gap. It's rarely stated outright as "Dating is bad". Instead, it surfaces in an exasperated, "What will people say?"

"I was very male-centric until my early twenties, and I realised a big part of the reason was that I was always told to avoid dating instead of how to approach it. I wish the discussions at home were about the standards I need to set for myself and how I allow others to treat me, because those are the things you really need to be reminded of, especially by parents," reflects Nabila*, a recent graduate.

Of course, the concern is valid. Parents have reputations to uphold, names to protect, and values to follow. But the other side is the paranoia, the guilt of experiencing very human emotions, and the lingering shame when things don't work out.

I've heard a parent say that she doesn't allow her daughter to attend school events because boys and girls would be standing in close proximity. While I couldn't decipher whether her concern came from religious beliefs or simply a sense of safety, I could imagine the perspective of her 14-year-old daughter. Through her eyes, she would be the one staying home while her friends laughed, shared stories, and made memories she could only watch from afar. The frustration, the sense of being left out, and the comparison to her peers are feelings that often go unspoken, but they shape the way she sees herself, her freedom, and her place in the world.

The tension we feel under strict rules doesn't disappear when we leave home; it often reshapes our choices and the way we carry ourselves. Many young adults struggle with confidence after years of social restriction, feeling uncertain in situations where others move naturally. They may stumble over social cues, hesitate when interacting with the opposite gender, or second-guess themselves in group settings. Over time, these gaps can influence friendships, romantic relationships, and even career opportunities, as fear of judgment or failure lingers.

Jahan further highlights, "If young people are not given opportunities to make choices or express their opinions, they may struggle to understand who they are. Over time, this can lead to confusion, dependence on external validation, and difficulty trusting their own judgement."

When strictness is based on fear and punishment, it can reduce open communication. Teenagers may begin to hide their actions—not out of rebellion, but as a way to protect themselves from judgment or punishment." She adds that this can also affect how young people relate socially: "If they have not experienced open dialogue at home, it can be difficult to express opinions or navigate relationships comfortably. Some may become withdrawn, while others may develop people-pleasing tendencies.

Until we become parents, we cannot truly know the fear of setting our children into the world. Every rule carries a weight of worry, every boundary a quiet plea for safety. Every troubling headline stirs unease, a reminder of the dangers that lurk beyond the walls we cannot control. Every bad grade whispers concern, a fear that they may be falling behind, that the world will leave them behind. The strictness around friends and acquaintances often blooms from a single hope—to shield their child from hurt, disappointment, or betrayal. Yet, beneath the surface of these rules lies a deep human tension: the struggle to balance love with freedom and protection with trust. Parents see threats and risks where children see only life, curiosity, and possibility.

I understood quite late that my mother's silence that day wasn't from the company I was keeping, but it was a revelation of the fact that I had made myself vulnerable and capable of being hurt. Over time, I was able to share parts of my life that were initially difficult for her to grasp, but it strengthened our relationship in the long run.

Being able to speak openly with your parents is comforting in a way nothing else is. Their stories, advice, and simply listening can turn all the fear and guilt into something you actually understand, and it feels liberating to be heard by the very people who shaped you.

**Names have been changed upon request*

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

THE LASTING CONSEQUENCES OF HARSH PARENTING

According to a significant study published in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, exposure to harsh parenting methods at the critical age of 13 years demonstrated a strong correlation with elevated levels of various risky adolescent behaviours, most notably including tobacco use by the time participants reached 18 years of age.

Furthermore, *Psychology Today* has reported findings indicating that children subjected to moderately or severely harsh parenting approaches exhibited considerably diminished emotional regulation capabilities. These young individuals also experienced substantially lower levels of self-esteem and demonstrated reduced prosocial behaviours, including a decreased likelihood of helping others, when compared to their counterparts who were raised by parents employing less harsh disciplinary methods. The research further revealed that children of harsh parents encountered significantly more difficulties in establishing and maintaining healthy relationships with their peer groups.

Another research paper published in the *Child Abuse Review*, which systematically analysed and combined data from 45 separate studies examining Chinese parents and their children, uncovered particularly concerning behavioural outcomes. The findings indicated that children raised under harsh parenting conditions exhibited markedly higher rates of aggressive and defiant conduct, demonstrated increased tendencies toward shouting or violent behaviour, and faced elevated risks of developing Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Moreover, adolescents who experienced harsh treatment from either parent showed measurable deterioration in physical health markers and significant increases in Body Mass Index (BMI), according to findings published in the *Social Science & Medicine* journal, underscoring the comprehensive impact of harsh parenting on overall adolescent health.

ANIME REVIEW

Fate/strange Fake: All flash, no grail

SHAMS RASHID TONMOY

If you are an anime fan, you have almost certainly heard of the *Fate* franchise. Spanning light novels, visual novels, and anime series such as *Fate/Zero*, *Fate/stay night: Unlimited Blade Works*, and *Fate/Apocrypha*, each iteration revolves around the same core concept: the Holy Grail War, a battle royale where seven legendary figures (Servants) are summoned by mages (Masters) to fight for a wish-granting artefact. It is a premise that has proven endlessly flexible. Yet, perhaps no entry twists the formula as radically as *Fate/strange Fake*.

Originally a light novel by Ryōgo Narita (creator of *Baccano!* and *Durarara!!*), *Fate/strange Fake* transplants the Holy Grail War to the American city of Snowfield. However, this is not the usual seven-on-seven affair. Instead, a 'fake' Grail War erupts with thirteen Servants and thirteen Masters (the real count depends on your interpretation). For a franchise that thrives on structure, this promises much-welcome anarchy. The question is whether the 2026 anime delivers.

A FEAST FOR THE EYES, BUT NOT MUCH ELSE

A-1 Pictures has poured considerable resources into the animation, and it shows. The fight sequences are among the most visually spectacular of the year, boasting fluid choreography and striking effects. When *Strange Fake* leans into its action, it is undeniably thrilling. For viewers who enjoy turning off their brains for the 'sakuga' animation of *Demon Slayer* or *Solo Levelling*, this anime will feel right at home.

The problem is that, across 13 episodes, there is little else to hold onto. Unlike the plot-driven narratives that define the franchise's best entries, *Strange Fake* spins its wheels seemingly without a clear destination. The adaptation skips and compresses significant backstories and character moments, operating on a 'rule of cool' philosophy: introduce a colourful cast, showcase dazzling fights, and leave the majority underdeveloped. Keep in mind that, to understand how this story exactly begins, you have to watch *Fate/strange Fake: Whispers of Dawn*, an additional 55-minute special episode released in 2023. The first season is actually a sequel to that 2023 special.

WHERE THE 'STRANGE'NESS BECOMES FRUSTRATING

As a longtime *Fate* fan, one who fell in love with the franchise through *Fate/stay night* on Animax back in 2017 and still plays the mobile game *Fate/Grand Order* daily, I approached *Strange Fake* with high expectations. However, even having read the first three light novel volumes, I found myself confused by the pacing and narrative choices. Scene transitions felt abrupt. Characters dropped exposition out of nowhere. Key backstories, a hallmark of *Fate* storytelling, are skimmed or absent.

This is a shame because *Fate's* enduring appeal has never been solely about watching legendary figures trade blows. The magic lies in the interactions – King Arthur wrestling with modernity, Gilgamesh clashing with ideals, Hercules embracing tragedy – and in seeing how their histories connect to their present struggles. *Strange Fake* assembles a genuinely fascinating cast, from the enigmatic King Richard the Lionheart and the quirky Alexandre Dumas to the unsettling True Caster faction, but rarely gives them room to breathe. The result dazzles in the moment but leaves little lasting impression.

For anime-only viewers, the experience will vary. The omissions of minor plot details may not matter to those unfamiliar with the source material, but the show's tendency to skip over connective elements means even newcomers may struggle to piece together certain character motivations. As such, the overall first season feels less like a complete narrative arc and more like a highlight reel.

Longtime *Fate* devotees will recognise the ambition beneath the chaos, but may feel the absence of the character-driven depth that elevated the likes of *Fate/Zero* and *Unlimited Blade Works*. Narita's talent for juggling sprawling ensembles is well established, but this adaptation does not feel like it affords his work the runtime it deserves.

VERDICT: A BEAUTIFUL MISFIRE

Fate/strange Fake is a paradox: bursting with style, yet struggling for substance. Its animation is top-tier, its premise intriguing, and its cast brimming with potential. Yet, the final product feels hollow – a collection of stunning fights in search of a story. If you are here for the spectacle, you will definitely be satisfied. But if you come to Fate for rich character work, you may leave wishing for a more complete adaptation.

For my part, I will stay tuned for the second season. Until then, *Fate/strange Fake* remains exactly what its name suggests: a curious, beautiful, but ultimately 'strange', imitation.

ILLUSTRATION: **ABIR HOSSAIN**

FICTION

When time stands still

TINATH ZAEBA

At first glance, you would not notice that I live in a fragile prison, a home with two bulbs of glass pinched at the throat, sand forever descending. Inside, I walk on grains as fine as dust, pale gold that shifts beneath my weight. No matter how much I gather into my hands, the sand slips through my fingers, scattered by the smallest breath of movement.

I have always measured myself by time, not in the softness of moments but in the speed of them. I am the child who ran before she could walk, the student who devoured lessons meant for later years, the woman who leans into tomorrow before today has even finished. To be ahead of the curve is not just ambition; it has become my rhythm. My eyes are rarely fixed in the present; they are drawn instead to the narrow passage where sand rushes through, to what comes next, to what I must achieve sooner rather than later.

So, when he steps into my hourglass the very first time, the impossible occurs: the sand halts mid-air. The falling grains suspend themselves in light, glittering as though a thousand stars were scattered between us. Time, once relentless, stills in anticipation. The urgency I have always carried, the need to be faster, better, and further, dissolves into something weightless.

He is not a clock or the hand that turns it. He is the light that refracts through the glass, bending the hours into strange, beautiful shapes. Where once I saw nothing but a relentless funnel, I now see colours dancing on each grain, hues that only appear when illuminated by him. I was so busy counting the sand before it even fell that I never thought to just watch how it descends.

Inside the glass walls of my hourglass, I have always felt the inevitability of decline, yet I never realised that even falling is beautiful. The sand between my fingers has meaning as it slips through: each grain is precious because each grain can hold him. It would be easy to say that he stops the hourglass entirely, but it would not be true. Each grain lingers longer before falling, each second swells into a full breath, and the hourglass does not stop; it slows just enough for me to pause.

My home grows beyond the hourglass; time stops becoming my enemy; it is no longer a race. It is a companion, and like all companions, it requires attention. To love the present, to dream of the future without regretting the past. He exists in this very moment, and so, if I want to be with him, I must exist here too.

Your time is only well spent if it is traced to the feelings you share with the ones that make it meaningful. For the first time, I understand that it is not meant to be outrun; it is meant to be lived.

So, we remain here, where sand is suspended like stars around me, light refracting across the glass. I am alright with staying still. I do not always have to run to conquer or to achieve. The hourglass flips over and over. I do not notice. I am simply here.

Tinath Zaeba is an optimistic daydreamer, a cat mom of 5 and a student of Economics at North South University. Get in touch via mailing to tinathzaeba25@gmail.com

ILLUSTRATION: **ABIR HOSSAIN**

POEM

Sorceress

PUNOMI RAHMAN TITIR

By the flickering stove,
blue potion jars
cradling in-between worn-out fingers
swivelling amidst cracks of skin
meld into warmth.
By the stirring ladle,
blue potion jars
tucked underneath hollow armpit
spaces
slipping between stitches of a tattered
blouse piece
stream into liquid.
By the brewing cauldron,
blue potion jars
spilled into spread mud vessels
scent of warm coconut
waft through the air.
By the old sorceress,
who plaits my hair
stretched fingers pressing against
desert scalp
drenched roots untangled tufts
threaded back.
By the silence that moulds,
my drowsy head rested onto her laps
drift into time
until the snug melts away
like blue potion jars.

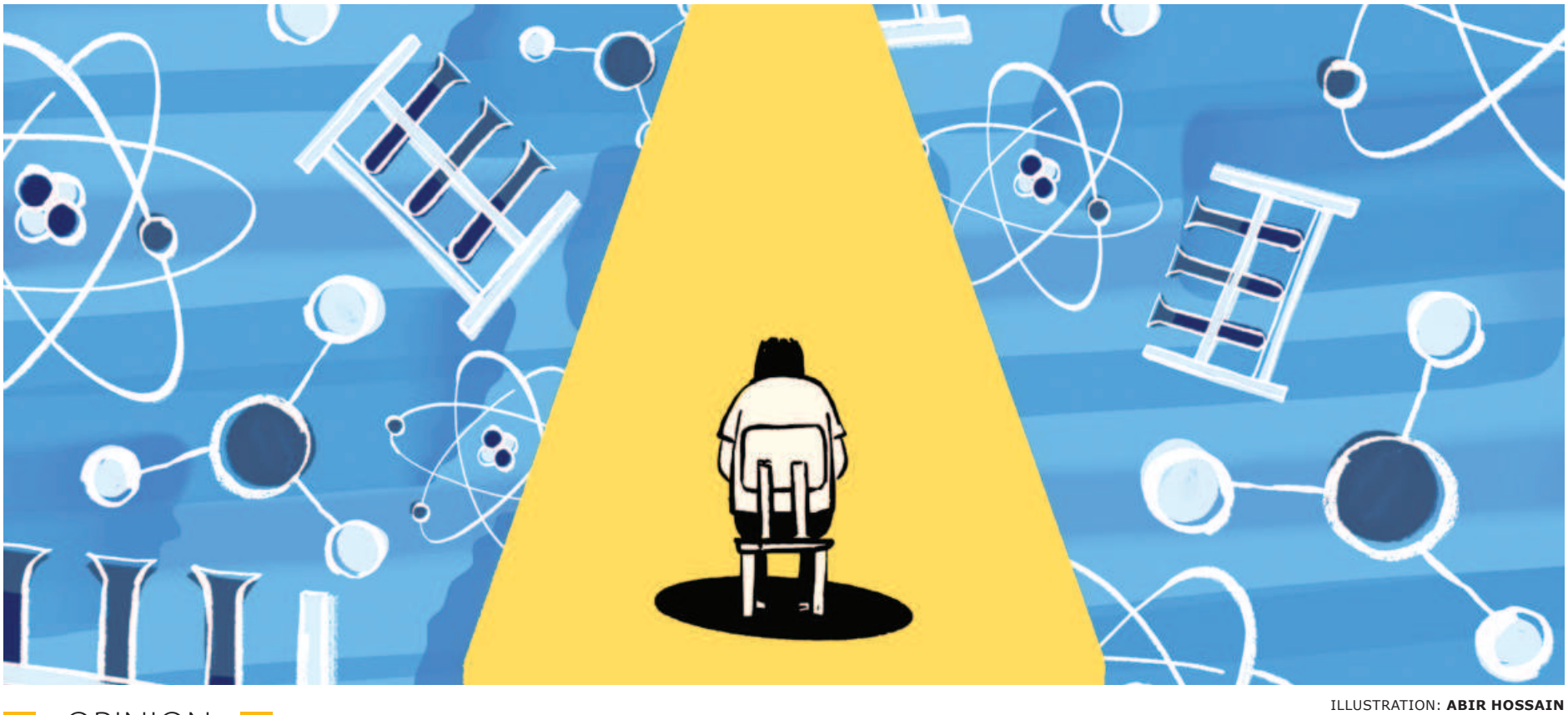

ILLUSTRATION: **ABIR HOSSAIN**

OPINION

The illusion of choice in choosing science

SHEIKH FABIHA AMREEN

At the tender age of 13 or 14, all students of the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) curriculum are faced with a choice: "Which academic stream are you going to choose: science, humanities, or business studies?" For the average student with decent grades, the answer is almost predetermined – science.

During the first class of ninth grade, after I had chosen science of my own volition, my entire section was held hostage by one teacher. He asked everyone, one by one, why they had chosen science. Most of my classmates were silent, simply absorbing his backhanded remarks like, "You chose this because everyone else did", or "Your parents forced you to, didn't they?"

When it was my turn, I answered, "I have questions about how my world works. I want answers to them." He just laughed in my face. That moment radicalised my perception of the education system. Societal obligation triumphs genuine intellectual drive, and you are dismissed if you attempt to stand out. Because the system was never really designed around individual motivation to begin with. It was designed to produce high-GPA statistics.

This contradiction becomes even more apparent when viewed through a critical lens. I gathered that if a student does not have a family member who majored in non-STEM routes, the pressure to take science is intensified further. This phenomenon is deeply intertwined with the state of the job market and the societal value in Bangladesh.

Students are not picking a stream to learn for the sake of learning; they are forced to reckon with employment opportunities before they have even come of age. It does not help that there is a pervasive, damaging preconception that students from non-STEM backgrounds face the highest rates of unemployment. This makes students and parents alike terrified that a degree in history or economics is a one-way ticket to professional obscurity. The irony is that many science students spend years grinding to complete a STEM degree just to pursue an MBA to end up as bankers – the very profession a business studies student could have pursued far more directly.

The deck is stacked against the non-STEM streams long before the choice is even made. In the years leading up to class nine, NCTB students are given a general science textbook that provides a reasonable idea of what the stream will entail. There is no such equivalent for business studies or humanities. Some might argue that the *Bangladesh and Global Studies* book serves this purpose for the humanities, but it can hardly be called a substitute when it does not introduce students to the foundational concepts of economics or political science. They are never given the chance to discover their aptitude for the social sciences.

Business studies fare no better. One chapter on statistics, buried within a broader curriculum, does not constitute meaningful exposure to accounting, finance, or the conceptual core of the stream. Students arrive at the point of choosing without ever having been given the tools to make an informed decision. The playing field is tilted before the game even begins.

The most disheartening part of this journey is that even students who do choose science find that the freedom supposedly promised by the stream rarely materialises in practice. According to official NCTB guidelines, science students have the option of taking statistics or engineering drawing in place of higher mathematics or biology as their fourth subject. This degree of flexibility is not granted in practice, however, as most colleges simply do not offer these alternatives, leaving students with the standard combination of subjects regardless of their individual strengths or interests. The track that is sold entirely on the promise of freedom turns out to be just as rigid as the others.

There is also the matter of what happens to students who either choose non-STEM from the outset or who attempt to switch streams after initial placement. Schools sometimes assign students to science automatically, without consultation, based on a GPA threshold they deem sufficient. They make the process of correcting this as troublesome as possible – contacting guardians and applying pressure in the name of counselling. Sometimes they are bold enough to say it outright: "You are making a mistake." The underlying message is clear: you are too good a student to make a choice like this.

Even for those who manage to switch tracks, the social environment rarely welcomes what is seen as an anomalous choice. Their decision is treated as a betrayal of their potential and a slight against the students who were deemed too inferior to study science in the first place.

The cumulative effect of all of this is a generation of students making one of the most consequential decisions of their academic lives under conditions of incomplete information, social coercion, and structural issues at an age when they are barely equipped to process any of it. The cultural problem is harder to fix through policy alone, but if institutional respect for all three streams is built into how schools are run, how teachers are trained, and how universities evaluate applicants, the social stigma would gradually erode. Reform has to happen at the structural level first. Until then, our students will continue to navigate an illusion of choice — trapped in a system that values their compliance far more than their curiosity.

Fabiha is convinced that her life is parodying Shakespearean commedia dell arte and is fighting to change the genre. Inspire her to make better life choices at: s.fabiha.amreen@gmail.com