Shishu Park: the missing piece of Shahbagh

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ILLUSTRATION: JAWWAD SAMI NEOGI

I often catch myself, almost involuntarily, looking towards the spot where Shishu Park once stood whenever I pass through Shahbagh. It doesn't matter whether I am heading to the university, Pathak Samabesh, or simply cutting through Suhrawardy Udyan. Somehow, my eyes still expect to find the familiar entrance gate waiting there.

I know the gates are gone. I know the little train no longer whistles its way around the park. There are no impatient children bargaining with exhausted parents for "just one more ride."

The metallic horses no longer go round and round to the endlessly cheerful "Amader deshta shopnopuri..." --a song that, despite the best efforts of adulthood, still lurks somewhere in the back of our minds.

For many of us who grew up in Dhaka in the late nineties or early 2000s, back when childhood was still blissfully screenless, the gates of Shishu Park marked the address of happiness.

Behaved well on your exams? Shishu Park. Relatives visiting from outside Dhaka and insisting on "seeing the city"? Shishu Park. Eid holidays? Shishu Park. A winter evening walk through Ramna with your father? Shishu Park.

Pahela Baishakh? Pahela Falgun? A book-hunting day at the Ekushey Book Fair that somehow ended with the promise of "just one ride?" Definitely Shishu Park!

Looking back, the destination almost didn't matter. The day could begin anywhere -- in Shahbagh, Ramna, or the Book Fair grounds. But somehow, it found its way to those familiar gates.

Sometimes, you did not even need an occasion. A lazy Friday afternoon with nowhere particular to be was reason enough.

It did not matter which part of Dhaka you came from: Mirpur or Mohammadpur, Dhanmondi or Jatrabari, Uttara or Old Dhaka. Inside those gates, every child wanted the same things -- to sit in the front compartment of the toy train, to wave from the top of the Ferris wheel, and to convince their parents that one more ride token would surely be enough. Which, again, was never enough!

Now, I don't think those of us who were children then were particularly fascinated by the rides themselves. Even by the standards of that time, they were modest. The paint peeled. The rides creaked. The little train probably travelled slower than a peddle rickshaw.

But none of that mattered.

A Tk 10 ticket was never just a ticket there. And those painted horses were never merely pieces of metal bolted to a merry-go-round. On some days, they were royal stallions galloping through enchanted kingdoms. On others, they carried us into battles that existed only in our heads.

Long before screens learnt to entertain us, Shishu Park quietly taught us how to entertain ourselves. All it took was a handful of tickets and an imagination willing to do the rest.

And then there was that one day every week when the park opened its gates to street children. Looking back, I doubt any of us understood the significance of that day. We only noticed that the queues were longer, the laughter was louder, and the toy train somehow looked more eager, carrying every child who climbed aboard.

And that, perhaps, was Shishu Park's greatest achievement. It belonged to everyone.

But we have perhaps lost it! And the strange thing about cities is that they rarely stop to mourn what they lose.

Even without Shishu Park, Shahbagh continues its familiar routine. The flower stalls still splash colour across the pavements. The National Museum still welcomes curious visitors. Dhaka University still spills students, slogans, festivals, and traffic onto the streets. Every February, the Ekushey Book Fair returns faithfully.

Everything seems to find its way back to Shahbagh.

Except the one place where a child's joy was never measured by where they came from.

Tourist dies after falling into sea while parasailing in Cox's Bazar

The man from Khulna was rescued and taken to hospital, where doctors declared him dead

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Cox's Bazar*

A tourist died after falling into the sea while parasailing in a Cox's Bazar beach yesterday.

The deceased was identified as Shouvik Roy, of Khulna, who was visiting Cox's Bazar with a group of 9. The accident occurred around 12:30pm at Dariyanagar beach, police said.

Officer-in-Charge of Cox's Bazar Sadar Model Police Station Sheikh Mohammad Ali said Shouvik fell into the sea while going on a parasailing ride.

Shouvik was rescued and taken to Cox's Bazar Sadar Hospital, where doctors declared him dead.

Resident Medical Officer Dr Subaktagin Mohammad Sohel said Shouvik was brought dead to the hospital at 2:10pm. The exact cause of the death can be determined after an autopsy.

Mahmudul Hasan, executive magistrate of the district administration's tourism cell, said the body has been kept at the hospital morgue.

He also said the district administration had instructed all parasailing operators to suspend operations due to adverse weather conditions. However, the operator involved in today's incident allegedly violated the directive and continued offering rides.

Since today's accident, the entire staff as well as the owner of the company have fled, he added.

Cox's Bazar Deputy Commissioner Mohammad Abdul Mannan said no operator has been officially authorised to conduct parasailing activities on the beach.

"We have repeatedly shut down these operations, but they resume after some time," he said.

According to locals, the parasailing service involved in the accident is operated by a company, owned by Mohammad Farid. They alleged that the same operator had been involved in previous parasailing accidents.

Although the service was reportedly suspended following earlier incidents, it was later allowed to resume operations, raising fresh questions about regulatory oversight and enforcement of safety standards.

Myanmar rebels trading drugs for goods

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cement, pulses and ginger because of acute shortages in conflict-hit Rakhine, the source said.

One trafficking route begins at Ayeik Sit jetty in Myanmar's Ayeyarwady region, where drugs are packed and loaded onto fishing boats before being taken into the Bay of Bengal.

Another starts in Yangon and passes through Minbya, Ann, areas near Sittwe, Rathedaung and Maungdaw before reaching areas close to the Bangladesh border.

"Myanmar-side carriers allegedly use satellite devices to contact Bangladeshi receivers before handing over the consignments mid-sea," the source said, requesting anonymity.

The consignments then enter Bangladesh through different points along the Naf River, the source said.

Confirming the use of yaba as a form of payment by Myanmar rebel groups, Somen Mondol, deputy director of the Department of Narcotics Control (DNC) in Cox's Bazar, said daily essentials were being smuggled from Bangladesh while yaba entered the country in return.

"In many cases, fishing boats cross the border with goods. Later, while returning, they bring yaba in the same boats," he told The Daily Star.

He said hundi had long been used to settle transactions, but the pattern had changed.

"Now, along with hundi, goods are being sent from here, and drugs are coming in return."

Asked who was behind the trade, Somen said a section of Rohingyas was involved, assisted by local groups.

The source, who is familiar with the trade, also shared a wholesale price list for yaba and crystal meth.

According to the list, Diamond-brand yaba sells for Tk 120 per white tablet and Tk 110 per red tablet. Lion-Shingaw sells for Tk 105 per tablet, Seriya for Tk 100, Three Stars for Tk 95 and Zinfore for Tk 115.

Crystal meth, or "ice", sells for Tk 4.5 lakh per kilogram for higher-quality products and Tk 3.5 lakh for lower-grade varieties.

The list showed Diamond to be the most sought-after yaba brand.

The flow of yaba from Myanmar has increased over the past two years after the Arakan Army took control of large stretches of the border, according to officials.

Fighting between Myanmar's military and ethnic armed groups escalated in November 2023. The AA has since reportedly captured nearly 80 percent of Rakhine State. The military later cut off supply lines, triggering severe shortages of food, fuel and construction materials.

"To fill those shortages, the AA now depends heavily on supplies from Bangladesh, offering drugs in exchange," a senior police official monitoring activities along the Myanmar border told The Daily Star on condition of anonymity.

The DNC's Annual Drug Report Bangladesh 2025 also points to a sharp rise in trafficking.

Law enforcement agencies seized 43,562,811 amphetamine-type stimulant (ATS) tablets in 2025, up 90.58 percent from 22,857,751 in 2024. In 2023, the figure stood at 42,977,219.

ATS refers to synthetic stimulant drugs, including methamphetamine-based yaba and MDMA.

DNC Director General Md Hasan Maruf said the growing supply was linked to Myanmar rebel groups using yaba as a "narco-currency".

SHIPMENT TO MYANMAR

A suspected smuggler has been sending daily commodities, including cement, rice, lentils and edible oil, from Bangladesh to Myanmar at least three times a month and returning with yaba tablets, according to a fisherman who worked on his boat.

The suspect, identified as Khalil Majhi, lives in Manpura, Bhola, but operates a fishing boat between Chattogram port and Myanmar.

The fisherman, who requested anonymity, told The Daily Star that Khalil had been involved in the trade for the past year.

He said each round trip between Chattogram and Myanmar takes around five days. The head boatman receives Tk 3 lakh per trip, while other crew members are paid Tk 30,000 to Tk 40,000 each.

According to the fisherman, fishing nets and fish are kept on the boat's upper deck. On outbound journeys, daily commodities are stored on the lower deck. On the return trip, fish brought from Myanmar are loaded there, with yaba tablets concealed inside the fish.

Contacted by The Daily Star, Khalil denied any involvement in illegal trade.

"I rented out my boat for the last six months. The person who took it on rent is doing this business. I am not involved in any illegal trade. Once I came to know about the activities, I recently brought the boat back under my control," he said.

However, Khalil failed to identify the person to whom he claimed to have rented the boat.

SENT ABROAD

The source familiar with the trade with Myanmar rebel groups also claimed that while most of the drugs are consumed in Bangladesh, some consignments are flown to Oman, Saudi Arabia and Dubai through Dhaka and Chattogram airports.

Officials said almost all yaba and crystal meth entering Bangladesh originates in Myanmar, with 80 to 90 percent consumed domestically.

Only small quantities are smuggled abroad through air passengers or courier parcels, mainly to countries with large Bangladeshi migrant populations, a DNC official said on condition of anonymity.

"There have been attempts to send yaba to the Middle East, Europe and the United States, but these are not large-scale trafficking routes," the official said.

Another DNC intelligence official said such attempts had declined significantly after airports strengthened security through improved scanning systems and CCTV surveillance.

Officials said traffickers had also used courier services to send drugs to the Middle East, Europe, the United States and Australia, but tighter monitoring has made the route increasingly difficult.

CONTINUOUS FLOW

The Border Guard Bangladesh's 64 Battalion guards key stretches of the Naf River along Ukhiya and Teknaf in Cox's Bazar.

Its commanding officer, Lt Col Md Zahirul Islam, said traffickers frequently shifted routes whenever surveillance was tightened, moving through other border points or maritime channels.

"Whenever pressure increases in one area, they look for alternative routes," he said, adding that improved surveillance technology had helped increase yaba seizures.

The BGB said last year that the Arakan Army was directly involved in yaba trafficking and that smuggling had increased through remote areas of Bandarban's Naikhongchhari.

Recent operations by the Bangladesh Navy also point to the scale of the cross-border smuggling network.

On June 26, naval personnel detained 21 alleged smugglers and seized two fishing boats carrying 1,450 sacks of cement in separate operations in the Bay of Bengal.

Earlier that month, on June 2, another operation near Saint Martin's Island led to the arrest of 20 people and the seizure of 1,700 sacks of cement. The detainees told investigators the consignment was bound for Rakhine State, where the materials would fetch high prices.

In February, acting on intelligence about a major customs evasion network, the Navy detained 19 suspected smugglers near Saint Martin's Island and seized 1,140 sacks of cement, 250kg of pulses, 160kg of ginger and 360 bottles of energy drinks.

In another operation in December last year, the Navy detained 11 people and recovered 650 sacks of Bangladeshi cement and 1,000 litres of diesel that were allegedly being smuggled to Myanmar.

Officials said the repeated interceptions reflected the growing demand for

Bangladeshi goods inside conflict-hit Rakhine, where prolonged fighting and military supply restrictions have created acute shortages of essential commodities.

Sources said severe shortages in Rakhine have made Bangladeshi goods extraordinarily valuable. A bag of cement worth around Tk 500 in Bangladesh can reportedly fetch as much as 100,000 Myanmar kyats in conflict-hit areas, generating huge profits that keep cross-border smuggling networks active despite intensified enforcement.

NOT JUST MYANMAR

The use of narcotics as a form of currency is not confined to Myanmar rebel groups.

Officials and law enforcers familiar with anti-drug operations in border areas said similar informal settlement systems are used in the narcotics trade along Bangladesh's border with India.

They said traffickers also exchange narcotics such as Phensedyl, cannabis and heroin for commodities, alongside illegal hundi transactions.

Former Kasba Police Station sub-inspector Faruk Hossain, who served for several years in border areas and took part in multiple anti-drug operations, said traffickers use several covert methods to pay Indian suppliers for narcotics smuggled into Bangladesh.

According to Faruk and DNC officials, most payments are made through illegal hundi networks. Bangladeshi traffickers deposit money with local hundi operators or selected mobile financial service agents, while their counterparts in India receive the equivalent amount in rupees through coded transactions.

They said traffickers also use cash carriers to move money across the border, particularly in frontier areas. In some cases, cash or rupees are handed over directly to suppliers when drug consignments cross the border.

Faruk and DNC officials said payments are sometimes settled through cross-border trafficking of commodities such as gold, hilsa and other contraband instead of cash. In such cases, the value of those goods is adjusted against the price of narcotics supplied from India.

US has strong confidence in Tarique's leadership

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The two sides also agreed to resume product testing activities in Bangladesh in cooperation with the US Food and Drug Administration, according to the foreign ministry.

Tarique invited US investment in warehousing facilities for soybeans, cotton, wheat and other agricultural commodities to strengthen Bangladesh's supply chains. He also sought greater investment in the country's IT sector.

Finance Corporation (DFC), with Gor expressing Washington's willingness to expand DFC cooperation.

Gor's emphasis on investment marked an important shift in US engagement, said M Humayun Kabir, a former ambassador.

"There has been considerable criticism of the reciprocal tariff agreement -- increased US investment could help offset those concerns."

The US could make substantial investments in IT, pharmaceuticals, education and agriculture -- sectors that Bangladesh urgently needs to generate employment.

"Both China and the US are interested in investing in Bangladesh. If Dhaka improves its investment climate and governance and manages these relationships wisely, it stands to benefit significantly."

Asked about Gor's meeting with Indian High Commissioner Dinesh Trivedi, a foreign ministry official said such consultations were unsurprising given the current state of India-Bangladesh relations.

The government should continue to engage all major powers under its "Bangladesh First" foreign policy, said Lailufar Yasmin, a professor of international relations at Dhaka University.



Prime Minister Tarique Rahman at a meeting with US Special Envoy for South and Central Asia Sergio Gor and US Ambassador to Bangladesh Brent T Christensen at the PMO in the capital's Tejgaon yesterday. PHOTO: PID

Gor said Bangladesh could eventually become a partner in the PAX Silica initiative, a US-led economic-security coalition launched in December 2025 to secure supply chains for artificial intelligence, semiconductors and critical minerals.

The two sides also discussed potential investment through the US International Development

"We are not against the interests of any country. We want to work with everyone in pursuit of Bangladesh's national interest."

Tarique's choice of China for his first foreign visit may initially have raised questions in Washington and New Delhi but Gor's remarks demonstrate US confidence in the current government, she added.

Dhaka must shield ties with key actors

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Washington, a key Saudi ally, has yet to confirm it will join the coalition, although it is expected to do so.

Analysts say the move is consistent with Bangladesh's longstanding support for freedom of navigation, but cautioned that Dhaka carefully manages its ties with Iran, with which it has maintained traditionally friendly relations.

Bangladesh's participation should be viewed primarily through the lens of national interest rather than regional politics, though Bangladesh maintains strong relations with the Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, where nearly seven million Bangladeshis work, said Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury, a retired air commodore.

"Iran may see the alliance negatively, but we don't have much choice. Our economy depends on free navigation. Ensuring safe sea lanes is in Bangladesh's own national interest."

He recalled that Iran had previously prevented a Bangladesh-flagged vessel from navigating through its waters, demonstrating how maritime disruptions can directly affect Bangladesh.

"There is considerable public sympathy for Iran in Bangladesh following the recent US-Israeli attacks. But foreign policy cannot be driven by public emotion alone. Bangladesh must act according to its national interest and geopolitical realities," he added.

The Houthis are attacking from Yemen, with which Bangladesh does not have much of a relationship, said M Humayun Kabir, a former ambassador.

He described Bangladesh's membership in the alliance as "largely normative and symbolic" rather than an indication of a major military commitment.

"I do not think Bangladesh is currently in a position to deploy naval assets if the coalition requires operational participation. But extending moral and political support for the principle of freedom of navigation is important."

Bangladesh has previously joined Saudi-led security initiatives without assuming an active military role, he said.

In December 2015, Bangladesh became a member of the Saudi-led Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), although Dhaka never deployed a full-fledged delegation to the coalition's headquarters in Riyadh.

He believes the current maritime coalition is likely to follow a similar pattern.

"Iran may not welcome Bangladesh's decision, but protecting maritime commerce serves Bangladesh's economy and national interest."

Bangladesh has earned global credibility through nearly four decades of participation in UN peacekeeping operations, said Shafqat Munir, senior fellow at the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies.

"We can play an important role in safeguarding maritime security in the Red Sea and Gulf region through this coalition."

However, he cautioned that Dhaka should fully understand the alliance's operational framework before making deeper commitments.

"Before we fully commit ourselves, we need clarity on the command structure, Bangladesh's expected role and other operational modalities."

The Middle East is currently highly fractured, and Bangladesh has to ensure that its relations with all key actors are properly safeguarded, Munir added.