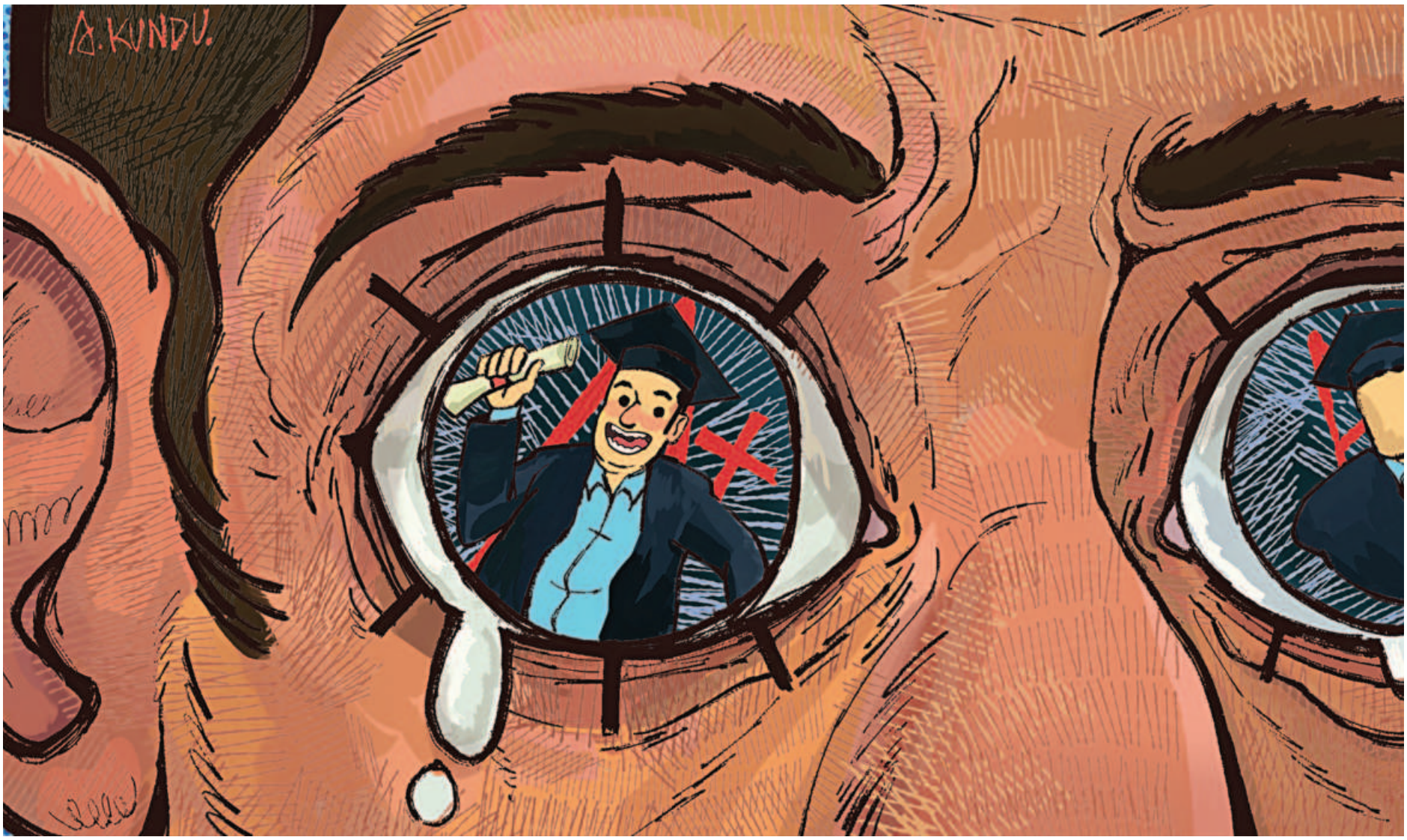



ILLUSTRATION: **ARINDOM KUNDU**

OPINION

# The cost of our obsession with meritocracy

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Ask a student what their roll number is, and you might get a very different reaction depending on the number. A low number can come with praise, whereas a higher one can invite jokes, assumptions, and, sometimes, a shift in how people treat you. We laugh about it, but the joke points towards something more serious about the way we understand academic success.

In our culture, there is a certain obsession with meritocracy. We love the student who comes first: the perfect score, the name announced at the assembly, and the photograph posted after results. We celebrate the outcome so enthusiastically that we rarely stop to ask what happens before that moment. What does it actually take to create an environment where students can succeed?

A meritocracy only works if everyone starts from the same point, with the same resources, the same support, and the same room to fail and try again. In reality, only some students are at the starting line while others are already 10 metres ahead.

What we've built, instead, is a culture that expects everyone to run the same race, while quietly ignoring the fact that some students were given a head start. We celebrate it as if grades show who worked hardest but rarely admit the unequal circumstances, expectations, and treatment that surround those grades.

In Bangladesh, academic success is often compressed into a handful of numbers: marks, grades, GPA, and class rankings. Sometimes, roll numbers become convenient shorthand for a student's ability. But a number can tell us what happened. It cannot always tell us why.

If we look at two students who scored 70 percent marks on a test, one of them could have spent months working their way up from 50, and the other may have just fallen from 90. Same score, different stories. Yet our culture is often more interested in the final destination than the journey it took to get there.

Take something as ordinary as seating arrangements. In many classrooms, students are segregated by their grades. The high scorers are seated up front, and everyone else is seated in the back rows, as if it were a gravitational pull. It may just seem like a simple seating arrangement, but it can often make students feel marginalised. Teachers call on them less, their questions start getting shorter answers, and, eventually, some students just stop asking.

This is the part of meritocracy nobody wants to talk about. It doesn't just reward the front row; it also penalises the rest. A student who is struggling isn't simply identified as needing help. Rather, they're sorted out of the spaces where help usually reaches. The system claims to measure ability, but what it's often measuring is who already had the advantage of stability at home, tutoring at home, or being able to join multiple coaching classes.

This shows up even in the simplest, mundane parts of school life in the form of how students get divided into different sections just because of contrasting grades or how friend groups drift apart after they are advised not to surround themselves with students with lower grades, as if academic performance is a personality trait.

The same fixation can extend beyond classrooms. Report card season isn't really about asking whether a child understood the material or grew as a learner. It ends up fixating on the number attached to their name and how it compares against a cousin's, a neighbour's, or a classmate's. "Did you improve?" quietly gets replaced by "Where did you rank?" And the two questions, despite sounding similar, lead students toward entirely different relationships with learning, where one builds curiosity and the other instils self-consciousness.

A student who moves from struggling with mathematics to confidently solving problems may have achieved something profound, even if their position barely changes. A student who learns to write independently, develops the courage to ask questions, or finally understands a concept they once feared may have made an achievement that cannot be captured by a rank sheet.

None of this means that grades are meaningless. They are useful indicators of hard work, and healthy competition itself is not harmful, so excellence should absolutely be encouraged. But if meritocracy is supposed to reward ability and effort, the culture surrounding it must also give students opportunities to develop both.

The real failure of our obsession with merit is not that we celebrate achievement too much, but that we, sometimes, celebrate the result while forgetting the conditions that make improvement possible.

A healthy academic culture should not only ask, "Who came first?" It should also ask, "What did we do to help them get there?" Otherwise, we are not cultivating merit. We are merely getting very good at counting it.