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# RISING STARS

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# INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE PROGRAMMES

## And what they offer to high school students

DESIGN: **FAISAL BIN IQBAL**
PHOTOS: **COURTESY**

DID YOU KNOW?

# The origins of HALLOWEEN



Halloween's roots can be traced back to the ancient Celtic festival of "Samhain". The Celts, who lived 3,000 years ago in Central and Western Europe, celebrated the start of a new year on November 1. In the eighth century, Pope Gregory III designated the day to honour all saints. There was, nonetheless, some degree of eeriness that the date was characterised by, namely its association with human death.

This period signalled the end of warm weather and thus, bountiful harvests, and ushered in a season of dark, cold winter. As such, the Celts believed that on new year's eve (October 31), the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead was blurred, which is when they celebrated Samhain. The evening of October 31 came to be known as "All Hallows Eve", or simply "Halloween", when ghosts of the dead were believed to return to earth.

The ghosts were thought not just to cause mischief and damage crops but also to allow Druids, or Celtic priests, to predict the future. As a community that was left to fend for themselves in the face of the unpredictable natural world, the practice of prophesying was all important during a long, dark winter.

Editor & Publisher
**Mahfuz Anam**

Rising Stars Editor
**Faisal Bin Iqbal**

Rising Stars Team
**Abir Hossain**
**Azra Humayra**

Photographer
**Orchid Chakma**

Graphics & Layout
**TDS Creative Graphics**

Production
**Shamim Chowdhury**

Send your articles, feedback, and opinion to rs@thedailystar.net
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TV SERIES

# THE AMAZING DIGITAL CIRCUS

## A tribute to existential defiance within an absurdist world

**PUNOMI RAHMAN TITIR**



To enter the world of Glitch Productions' *The Amazing Digital Circus* is to witness a collision between the hyper-saturated joy of a neon-soaked digital whimsy and the paralysing dread of navigating through the utter bleakness of existence. Created, written, and directed by the indie creator and musician Gooseworx, it is originally a web series on YouTube with a total of nine full episodes. After its initial debut in 2023, the show's widespread success eventually brought it to Netflix, culminating in a limited theatrical release for its finale in June 2026.

From its opening frames, the series establishes an unyielding premise: a group of human souls have been stripped of their names and autonomy, trapped inside a colourful virtual funhouse governed by Caine, an AI ringmaster whose sanity is as questionable as the reality he commands. Their entry is a one-way ticket, with no past to return to and no logical explanation for their imprisonment. The world is, by every definition, completely absurd.

The show begins as Pomni, the newest addition to the circus team and the protagonist of the story, is trapped inside the body of a cutesy cartoon jester. She is confused; at best and at worst, she turns anxious in search of an escape from this bizarre reality that she fails to understand. However, with the support of her new friends, she gradually learns the community's unwritten rules for survival. The seasoned circus members guide her through the routine adventure video games that they are forced to attend by Caine.

What makes the series immensely enjoyable, and dare I say, impossible to put down, is the characteristic depth that goes behind the curation of every character. Each character is as complex and distinguishable as the other, with heavy topics such as psychological horror, dark humour, and violence being introduced from time to time.

Gooseworx's approach to how she understands and explores numerous elements of human trauma throughout the series is one that is worthy of loud applause. She does a wonderful job depicting how abuse translates differently to every other person, not only in terms of how it shapes them later in life as an adult, but also in the fact that different people develop different coping mechanisms to deal with what they have yet to heal from.

When a circus member reaches their absolute breaking point and "abstracts" out of despair, they transform into a mindless, glitching beast that is thrown into a dungeon. This event is meant to signify self-destruction and ultimately what may translate to death in the real world. From time to time, the characters are made to process their shared grief over the loss of friends, which, for a few, acts as the binding force that ties them closer to the others. For others, the bereavement completely shatters their psyche, pulling them away into total desolation.

Throughout the episodes, many of the characters, including Claine himself, evolve through massive character development arcs, showcasing deep-seated struggles with identity and self-image. Interestingly enough, even some of the NPCs exhibit surprising layers of self-awareness and existential dread, somewhat blurring the line between programmed reality and genuine sentience. By refusing to sanitise the good and the ugly, and what it means to be human, *The Amazing Digital Circus* delivers a remarkably grounded story that is definitely worth a watch, or perhaps many.

INTERESTS

# Why everyone should try chess at least once

**SHARAR CHOWDHURY**



PHOTO: **ORCHID CHAKMA**

Everything we consume now is built for speed. Videos are 15 seconds long, articles are skimmed, and we have all been quietly trained to value the output and skip the process.

Chess is the exact opposite of that. You cannot rush it, you cannot skim it, and there is no version of it where you get good in a fortnight. You sit with one problem, concentrate for longer than feels comfortable, and slowly get better.

Chess is also simple to learn and impossible to master. The rules take an afternoon, and after that, you have a game with more possible sequences than there are atoms in the observable universe, which means no two games you play will ever be quite the same. A game from the sixth century still manages to feel new every single time someone plays it, which is quite fascinating.

The best part about chess is definitely the grind. You will get stuck, and you will sit at the same rating for weeks, lose six in a row, and want to throw away your phone. What chess teaches you in this scenario is pretty introspective: step away, come back later, and look again at how you are actually playing rather than blaming your luck. And when you finally break through, when you cross that golden 1000 rating, the feeling is euphoric in a way that very few things are.

Now, the myth. Most people picture chess as two silent old men staring at a board for six hours. That format exists, but it is not where the game lives now. Blitz and rapid are what everyone actually plays, and over the board, they are chaotic in the best way. There is banter. There is trash talk. When both clocks fall under 30 seconds, people start slapping pieces down and knocking half the board over.

Chess is also free. Chess.com and Lichess have millions of players between them, so you can find a game at two in the morning at whatever level you are. Every opening, tactic, and endgame has been explained on YouTube by someone better than you. The barrier to entry is essentially zero.

I should be honest about one thing, because it gets overstated. The research on whether chess makes you academically sharper is mixed. One large meta-analysis found a moderate benefit for maths and general cognitive skills, but other controlled studies found no meaningful transfer at all. I would not sell it as a brain upgrade but as a way to build discipline.

What I did not expect was how social the game actually is. Chess clubs exist at most universities and many schools as well, but they are tiny compared to the sports clubs, which feels like a missed opportunity. A chessboard is one of the easiest excuses to talk to a stranger that I have ever come across. It got me talking to people at university I would never have met otherwise, and at work, it put me in conversation with an entire department I had no professional reason to know.

Nobody intends to network over a chessboard. They just play, and the networking happens anyway. Hence, I think campuses should take it more seriously. You need a board, a clock and a room, or nothing at all if you play online.

Add proper tournaments with real prizes and actual stakes, and it becomes a spectacle rather than a hobby. If that sounds far-fetched, consider that chess is now a certified esport.

So, try it once. If it clicks, you are in for a treat. If it does not, you at least know the rules and can accept a game whenever one is offered. My only advice is to take it slowly and stop being afraid of losing, because the learning curve is steep and you will lose more than you win at first. You cannot become Magnus Carlsen in a month. Trust me, I have tried.

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*Sharar Chowdhury is learning how to be a manager and believes "I'm confused" is not a complete sentence. Send him emails atsharar672@gmail.com.*



COVER STORY

# What international exchange programmes offer to HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

**RAMISA RUBABA RASHED**

In an age of virtual connections, nothing quite beats the actual experience of forming connections outside of one's country. From Japan to the United States, international exchange programmes can not only provide high school students with first-hand immersion in culture but also become a medium for relishing the sweet flavours of independence and new perspectives. Beyond passports, plane tickets, and photographs lies the real promise of exposure: moving away from the comfort of your home at a tender age and learning how to belong somewhere unfamiliar, thousands of kilometres away from your country, while bringing back home a broader understanding of your own after the experience.

## ASIA KAKEHASHI PROJECT

The Asia Kakehashi Project+ is a Japanese government-sponsored programme that brings high school students from Asian and G7 countries to Japan for approximately five months. Among the international exchange programmes available to Bangladeshi students, the Asia Kakehashi Project offers a particularly immersive experience. Rather than limiting cultural exchange to organised short visits, the programme places selected students in Japanese schools and host families or dormitories, and it allows them to take part in intercultural and leadership activities.

## ELIGIBILITY AND APPLICATION

Usually, applicants have to be Bangladeshi citizens aged 15 to 18, have obtained a minimum of 60 percent marks in principle in all subjects in the latest examination at school, have an overall minimum average of 60 percent marks in all subjects over the past two years, have an interest in learning Japanese, demonstrate leadership potential, and have not previously participated in the programme. The application begins with a pre-application form. Eligible students are then contacted about the subsequent stages of selection, with shortlisted candidates proceeding to further screening.

## INSIGHTS INTO THE EXPERIENCE

I had the opportunity to chat with Nabila Sara, an alumna of the Asia Kakehashi 2023-2024 batch. When asked about what made her apply to the programme, Nabila said, "I found the Asia Kakehashi Project through a notice posted on the iEARN-BD Facebook page, researched the programme, and when I realised I could study in Japan through a fully funded opportunity, I immediately started to prepare myself for the application process."

Nabila said that though the selection process went very smoothly, she wishes she had focused more on learning Japanese beforehand because it would have strengthened her application and, more importantly, helped her communicate and connect more deeply with people in Japan.

Discussing the most memorable part of living and studying in Japan, Nabila said, "My school is one of the memories I cherish most because everyone made me feel welcome. My teachers and friends always went out of their way to help me with my studies even though almost everything was in Japanese. I also loved joining the Aikido club and having lunch with my friends every day."

We then asked her if she faced any challenges adapting to life in Japan. We found an honest response: "The biggest challenge was communicating in Japanese, especially when I wanted to express my feelings but couldn't find the right words. I learnt to explain myself more carefully, use gestures and emotions, and ask friends who understood English to help me communicate; I realised that when you genuinely want to connect with someone, you can find a way to understand each other."

Looking back on the experience, Nabila agreed that she gained an experience through this programme which wouldn't have been possible only as a tourist. She got to experience ordinary Japanese life,





PHOTOS: **COURTESY**

stayed with host families, attended a Japanese school, and shared meals. "Experiencing their customs and everyday routines allowed me to experience Japanese life from a much more personal perspective, which I don't think would have been possible as a tourist."

## KENNEDY-LUGAR YOUTH EXCHANGE AND STUDY PROGRAM

For students looking beyond the boundaries of their own community, the Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study (KL-YES) Program offers an opportunity to experience American high school life from within it. This programme is funded by the US Department of State. Selected Bangladeshi students spend a semester in the US, living with host families, attending local schools, and participating in activities that bring them into closer contact with a global community.

## ELIGIBILITY AND APPLICATION

Bangladeshi applicants must be 15 to 17 years old, enrolled in grade 8, 9, 10, or 11 in Bangladeshi high schools or colleges, hold Bangladeshi citizenship and residency, maintain at least a B average with no failing grades, and meet the programme's English and J-1 visa requirements. Applicants first complete the online preliminary application by the stated deadline, after which eligible candidates proceed through the programme's selection stages.

## INSIGHTS INTO THE EXPERIENCE

In a conversation with two alumni of the programme, we received many insights into the real-life experiences that this exchange provides. Mehedi Hasan Rifat represented Bangladesh in the US for the 2024-2025 year and was placed in New Oxford, Pennsylvania. Sreyoshi Hasan, a current tenth grader in South Breeze School, went on the exchange as a ninth grader for the 2025-2026 year back when YES was a year-long programme. She expressed that upon learning about YES, she was taken aback by the alumni stories, grew curious to see if American high schools were like



the movies she grew up watching, and wanted to experience living in America as a teenager to fulfil her "American Dream".

The KL-YES Program selection unfolds over four stages across five to six months: a written application, a phone interview, the in-person English Language Test for International Students (ELTiS) test with three essays, then a group interview followed by an individual one. Each round raises the stakes, so by the time you're selected, you already know you've earned it.

When asked about what it was like attending an American high school, we got some interesting responses.Rifat recalled, "My first day felt like walking into a show I'd grown up watching: yellow buses, pep rallies, and football under Friday night lights. Academically, the freedom to choose stood out most, with the concert choir and computer science sitting right next to core subjects, almost like a small university. Between cross country running, swimming, tennis, and clubs like robotics and student council, there was barely a version of myself I didn't get to try on that year."

Just like Rifat, Sreyoshi's reply also heavily emphasised the opportunities that the school leveraged. "I was a part of student council, speech, theatre, band, and choir in my American high school, and each of those experiences taught me a variety of new things about leadership, teamwork, and commitment, and being around locals obviously made me challenge a few of my own personal viewpoints as well."

Sreyoshi then went on to reminisce about a memorable experience that changed her perspective in a way she did not expect: a road trip to Texas from Iowa she went



on with her host dad and exchange sister. She remembered, "From the deep, philosophical conversations to our unique ways of teasing each other and creating new inside jokes to breaking down in the middle of Oklahoma in the freezing December night, that road trip really was one of a kind."

Living in an American community may affect the way one understands their own identity. This was evident as Sreyoshi went on about the community she was placed in, "My placement was in the middle of a farmland that really prioritised the agriculture-based businesses, seeing as it was Iowa and we were surrounded by corn fields. Being around this environment really made me appreciate our own agricultural businesses and farmers even more. I felt more connected to my roots in a sense, because I was able to realise the lengths our farmers go to in order to bring us quality crops. I began to appreciate the chaos of Dhaka a little more in moments where the silence on Iowa was a little too deafening."

Both Rifat and Sreyoshi emphasised the diversity and global community that the programme comes with. Rifat shared how the experience helped him expand his worldview: "The bigger gift was the friend group, teenagers from a dozen countries swapping stories about home, which quietly dismantled every stereotype I'd walked in with. I left that year thinking in a much wider radius than I arrived with. KL-YES Program left me thinking internationally by default."

Sreyoshi talked about the grandeur of the alumni network she can now immerse herself in. She stated that amongst the US government exchange alumni, there is a huge network of people who are willing to help out with anything and everything whenever one may need it. "It has been really fun and exciting to be a part of them and have their support," she expressed joyfully.

After these conversations, one thing becomes clear: an exchange programme is rarely just about the country one gets to visit. Behind every itinerary are conversations, friendships, moments of unfamiliarity, and small discoveries that can stay with a student long after they return home. Nabila suggested that before applying, one should build adaptation, communication, and Japanese-language skills. Most importantly, "Be genuinely curious, be ready to step outside your comfort zone, and remember that the experience is not just about going to another country; it is about learning to understand people, cultures, and yourself in a completely new environment," said Nabila.

So, if you are planning to apply in the future, go with curiosity, embrace the unfamiliar, ask questions, make the most of every conversation, and, above all, enjoy every moment. You never know which one you will remember long after you return home.

*Ramisa Rubaba Rashed is a born poet, daydreaming singer, stuck in the disguise of a wannabe biologist, and a full-time cat-mom. Send her your songs at raemsi.ruby@gmail.com.*

EXPLAINED

# WHY TREES ARE IMPORTANT FOR A CITY

**AYAZ KADER**

Around the world, urban areas, especially in developing countries like Bangladesh, suffer from an acute lack of trees. To accommodate infrastructure, houses, offices, etc., trees get treated as simply an obstruction that needs to be cleared out. This, however, ignores how trees are an essential organ for a city in order for it to function properly and be liveable for its residents. Trees work in various ways to maintain a city's environment, beauty, and liveability. Ignoring this fact produces grave consequences for a city that become impossible to rectify unless the role of trees in cities is acknowledged and respected.

## PREVENTING WATERLOGGING

One of the main reasons cities like Dhaka get waterlogged during monsoons, no matter how much the authorities invest in drainage infrastructure, is the lack of trees. Trees act as a canopy that slows down rainwater, thereby reducing the rate at which the ground receives rainwater. This allows rainwater to be drained without overwhelming drainage systems with excessive rainwater at once. Trees also improve soil's ability to absorb rainwater. Trees have deep roots that create paths for water to flow deep underground, reducing pressure on drainage systems, canals and rivers, and also stop water from accumulating on the surface. Trees also stabilise the soil by essentially acting as an "anchor". This prevents soil and pollutants from washing into canals and rivers, thus improving the ability of the water bodies to carry off water and prevent flooding.

## AIR POLLUTION

Trees absorb harmful gases like sulphur dioxide, carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, etc. that are profuse in urban areas. This makes trees essential in improving a city's air quality and protecting its residents from breathing harmful gases.

## HIGHER TEMPERATURES

Urban areas contain a lot of concrete and asphalt, which are excellent absorbers and emitters of heat. A large concentration of concrete creates what is known as an "urban heat island", which raises the surrounding temperatures. For example, a study published in the journal Environmental Challenges found that the construction of Dhaka's MRT Line-6, which cut down many trees and increased the density of heat-absorbing materials, has increased the temperature in that corridor by 3 to 5.5 degrees Celsius.

Trees can prevent such heat islands from forming by providing shade and hence stopping sunlight from directly reaching the heat-absorbing materials. Trees also cool surrounding areas by releasing water vapour in a process known as "evapotranspiration". This water vapour produces a cooling effect, lowering temperatures and providing much-needed relief to city residents.

## BEAUTY

Trees provide a sense of beauty and serenity in the otherwise dull and lacklustre concrete jungles of urban areas. Imagine this: you go out for a walk. What would you prefer? A vast swath of pavement, with large, dull concrete buildings at the side with no hint of greenery or a boulevard with rows of large, tall trees lining the sidewalks, with the road median decorated with various plants.

A walk in the latter obviously will feel much better for the mind and make you feel more rejuvenated due to the beauty of the backdrop. Having beauty must be a priority for every city in the world, and having more trees is one of the foremost ways of doing that.

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*Ayaz is a connoisseur of single-origin coffee beans. Email him your favourite coffee beans at ayazkader710@gmail.com.*



**A dense canopy of mature trees provides a vital green lung for the city as it stands in sharp contrast to the sprawling concrete skyline of Dhaka.**

PHOTO: **ORCHID CHAKMA**

FICTION

# THE RUSH

**SALMA ABU BAKER**

"Where's the train heading to Cox Bazar?" we asked.

"Platform eight!" the in-charge responded.

"Oh no! Platform five," he corrected himself.

I stood on the platform, beaming as the long-awaited journey to Cox's Bazar was finally about to begin. My siblings swarmed around me, chattering non-stop about all the things that were left to do. I, on the other hand, had only one thing on my mind: the comfortable bed and blanket waiting for me in the cold five-star suite.

My mind drifted through the pages of Malice, which I had brought along for the journey. Acting on impulse, I decided to saunter off to the washroom for a quick touch-up. Well aware of the condition of train station toilets, I handed my bag to my younger brother, Chotu.

10 minutes later, I returned to the platform to find them all gone.

My siblings.

My bag.

Everything.

The train was supposed to depart at 3:10. Where had everybody gone?

I borrowed the phone of a passer-by and called Chotu.

"Appi, the train is leaving! We're at Platform eight. Head to Umo!"

Instantly, the train in front of me began to move. Its wheels ground against the tracks, and the pistons sounded like an alarm. Who knew what they were trying to say?

I handed the phone back, broke into a run, and jumped into the carriage, landing on the bogey floor.

Phew.

That was a close shave.

I began making my way towards Umo.

But something was gnawing at me. Was it my still-palpitating heart, or was it a strange feeling that something was terribly wrong?

Randomly, I stopped and asked someone drinking tea, "*Bhai*, is this train heading to Cox's Bazar?"

His furrowed brow sent a shiver down my spine.

"No," he replied. "This is a one-stop train to Feni."

The floor beneath me suddenly felt as though it no longer existed.

My chest tightened.

For a moment, everything became a blur — faces, voices, thoughts. I could not understand what was happening. Lost and panicked, I began pacing through the corridor, blocking people along the way, muttering under my breath.

As I turned around, I bumped into a man dressed in white. Panting, I asked to borrow his phone.

Sensing that something was wrong, he dialled the number for me.

"What? Platform five? Mistake….?" I stammered, barely able to speak.

For a moment, he looked just as lost as I was. But explanations would have to wait. I was running out of time. Nervousness began eating away at me from within. My body shook as I begged one of the uniformed railway staff to do something.

My money.

My house keys.

My phone.

They were all travelling to Cox's Bazar from Platform five.

The man in white looked at me, his confused eyes meeting mine. I dialled the numbers again and finally resigned myself to the situation. "I'm heading to Feni," I said. "I'll find a way back!"



ILLUSTRATION: **ABIR HOSSAIN**

"Do you want to go home, or do you want to meet the others?" the man in white asked.

"The others?" I asked, perplexed.

He took that as his answer.

Picking up the phone, he gave an order: "Stop the train."

Within seconds, the train began to slow down. About a minute later, it came to a stop.

A set of instructions was relayed to me in what sounded like a robotic voice.

"Take... and go... to Sholoshahar Station. Your train will make a stop there in 20 minutes. I've informed them."

My stressed mind could only pick up a few words here and there. The man led me to the door.

Then I remembered. No money!

I mumbled uncertainly, "Could you lend me 200 taka? I'll find a way to send it back."

He fished out a note and silently signaled towards the tracks.

I splashed along the cobbled pathway in ankle-deep water in the middle of nowhere.

Different shades of green stretched out before me. This was uncharted territory, a place I had never visited before.

Following directions, I eventually reached the road. All the while, I made call after call using the phones of anyone willing to help.

No one declined.

I had to leave a trail.

Every time I borrowed a phone, I repeated the same instructions: "If the person calls back, tell them I've moved ahead."

Finally, I jumped into a CNG. My heart was screaming louder than the traffic.

At 3:48, the CNG stopped outside Sholoshahar Station. I sped across the tracks and jumped onto the platform, panting, "Has the train to Cox's Bazar arrived?" I asked breathlessly.

"No," someone replied.

In the distance, I heard the train whistle.

And just like that, it came screeching into the station. I rushed in alongside the sea of strangers streaming in. Finally, inside the train, a new tension haunted me. What if they get down to look for me? Through the window, I spotted a uniformed railway officer standing on the platform.

"Call this number… and tell them I'm on the train. Now!" The train began moving again.

Still bewildered, he made the call, and I watched his lips move.

I began elbowing my way towards Umo.

Just as I reached the compartment, the corner of my eyes caught sight of someone in blue, his head sticking out of the door. It was Chotu.

I let out a long sigh of relief.

Slumping into my seat after a nerve-racking hour, I sat still for a good while, trying to process what had just happened.

Silent prayers. Sudden intuitions. Strangers who became saviours.

Somehow, all of them had led me back to the train.

I rummaged through my bag for my phone, wondering whether the entire incident should be called an adventure or simply marked down as a terrible mistake. Perhaps not everything in life moves with clockwork precision, I thought. And perhaps, sometimes, you simply have to trust your instincts and run.

I made a mental note before the raw experience slipped away, and the questions came pouring in.

Carry your phone in a sling bag.

Keep some petty cash tucked inside your phone case.

Don't jump into a moving train. Life isn't *Jab We Met*.

Trust your instincts.

Guard your brain.

That afternoon, the primacy effect seemed to have stolen the show. The first piece of information we heard — Platform eight — lodged itself firmly in our minds. In the confusion and tension of the moment, our brains only held on to the first piece of information. In the end, however, I was on my way to Cox's Bazar, my siblings swarming around me, chattering non-stop about things that were left to do.

REFLECTIONS

# The problem with the ranking system in our schools




ILLUSTRATION: **AZRA HUMAYRA**

**IRFAN HOSSAIN**

Some of us may have that one classmate who studies the hardest, attends every class, takes notes, doesn't go to hangouts because of studying, and takes every test so seriously as if it determines their future for the rest of their life. And ironically, when the results are revealed, they are not in the top percentile of the class. They did well but not good enough. They are stuck in the middle range, never recognised among the toppers, even though they consistently put in the effort.

For the whole of my student life, I was that student.

Our educational institutions glorify this particular marks-centric ranking system. The top students are adored by the teachers and respected by the students, while students who have the grit but never seem to score as high are stuck in a kind of limbo with reduced confidence, believing that whatever they do, they can never be that good, so many stop trying because trying feels futile. The "not good enough" students, like I was, dream of being among the top. In our school, the "Top 10" was regarded as the elite, awarded every year at the annual sports day with a badge of honour.

I imagined myself on that stage more times than I would like to admit. School ended, then college ended, and the badge never came, in all those years of trying.

What stays with me is not the disappointment. It is a question I only started asking much later: what was that badge actually measuring? Not effort, not consistency, nor the discipline of opening the same book for the 100th time. It measured a single number, achieved by a small handful of people, and it quietly told the rest of us that our version of hard work did not count for much. It measured the result, not the cost of achieving it.

The concern is the culture that the ranking system creates. I have watched multiple peers try just as diligently as I did, term after term, only to stop trying completely at some point. Some of them slipped into depression. And through all of it, the one thing that rarely got acknowledged was the effort. Parents cared about only one thing: the result. Not how many hours were put in, not how many nights were lost to revision, just the number that came back on the result sheet.

Ranking systems like this exist almost everywhere, and increasingly, the people who study education are asking the same question I eventually did. Alfie Kohn, one of the prominent critics of grade-based competition, has argued that tiny grade point average (GPA) differences that separate top-ranked students from everyone are usually statistically meaningless, so singling out students manufactures a hierarchy. It creates an obsession with grades. His research points to something a lot of "not good enough" students learn the hard way: ranking systems push students toward easier tasks and turn classmates into rivals because the whole structure rewards getting better scores than the person you're sitting with in the class.

The clearest example, though, is Finland. There are no ranking systems in place like the schools in Bangladesh. This means students do not feel pressure to compete with each other, and the fear of failing is replaced by a genuine desire to learn. Their pedagogical philosophy is that cooperation, not competition, is what actually produces success in learning.

In stark contrast, in Bangladesh, it is as if the identity of the students is built around this ranking system. In many schools, a student's roll number is set by their previous yearly result. It is essentially a number branded onto a student's forehead for everyone to either glorify or laugh at. Relatives ask your roll number and think they know how "good" of a son or daughter you are. Teachers ask and decide how they will treat you. Classmates ask and decide whether you will be part of the group or not. The worst part is that it all starts from the very first day you step into school.

I do not know if our schools will ever stop branding students with a number.

But from experience, I know what I would tell the version of myself who spent years imagining wearing that badge: you never needed a badge to define you; it was the school system that needed one. Maybe the answer is not teaching students how to earn that badge. Maybe it is asking why we needed one in the first place.

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*Irfan spends his time writing, traveling, doomscrolling — and occasionally attending class for a degree he believes will be useful someday. Send him cat reels at: irfan.ink63@gmail.com*