

Ali: Does He Have a ‘Choice’?

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Abstract The life story of a 16 year-old boy, Ali, provides a glimpse into the livelihood choices of children living in urban slums in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Until recently, Ali's life and his community was characterised by urban crime and violence. In spite of having escaped the life of violence, the struggles of a child growing up in a marginalised, poor community remain far more complex and difficult than is often perceived from the outside.

Ali (name changed) is 16 years old and has lived in Dhaka, Bangladesh, all his life. He lives in one of the poorest parts of the city, Gubibagh, near Kamalapur Station, the main railway station in Dhaka. He lives with his mother, his elder brother Alam (name changed) and Alam's wife and child. They all live in a one-room shack. Ali is a social worker in Child Brigade, an organisation formed and managed by child workers from the streets and the slums. He has been working there for around five years. He, along with his colleagues, organises and manages awareness and educational projects for children like himself in Kamalapur and neighbouring areas. He occasionally does an odd job here and there to earn some extra money, such as driving a hen cart or rickshaw. He studies in Class 4 in Notre Dame Night School, an evangelist university which also holds night school for child workers like Ali. He is thin but strong and loves to hang out with his friends. He seemed hesitant to speak about his life. Instead, he finds it easier to talk about his friends and colleagues. Thankfully, since I had been introduced to him by someone he trusted, I was easily accepted, and so he narrated his story, but without much excitement. He is not very emotional, at least not in front of me, but he grows quiet if something upsets him. There is a sense of shame and guilt attached to his life, of being stigmatised for his past actions, and yet he is subtly reminiscent of the power he once had over others in the community.

When Ali was much younger, around 5–6 years of age, he worked as a *tokai*.¹ According to him, his parents never paid any attention to him and his brother and left them to their own devices. They didn't have the opportunity to study either, as they were very poor. He, like many other children on the streets, would collect waste and broken items which could be resold at the *bhangari*.² At the time he and his family lived in Mugda, which is also near Kamalapur station. The Phensidyl-trafficking business was also flourishing in the area. Phensidyl is a highly addictive codeine-based cough syrup banned in Bangladesh in the 1990s but trafficked from India, where it is still sold legally in the market. The *tokai* children

collect empty Phensidyl bottles as well as other recyclable and resaleable items. For them, the *bhangari* are a source of earning money from petty thefts. Children often steal more expensive items to earn more money for food and drugs, and the shop owners are aware of this. However, they fail to discourage it as their businesses profit from the stolen items.

The *bhangari* owners often have connections with drug lords and drug-trafficking rackets. They are often very powerful through their connections and run their businesses without trouble, even though there are people who object to them. One such *bhangari* owner asked Ali to deliver a packet.

During a conversation with Ali while returning home, I asked him about what he wished for his future, now that he was out of drug trafficking, working at Child Brigade and going to school. 'Nothing', he said. At that point, I didn't quite understand what he meant. It was finally after spending the two weeks with Ali, his friends and colleagues and the INGO (international non-governmental organisation) staff that I was able to connect some of the dots. The words he spoke were those of a boy who has lost the ground from under his feet and all the power from his hands. Everything he had ever known since he was little has become distant from him; or rather he has distanced himself from it. The power, the violence, the money, the business ... everything he was familiar with is no more. He seems trapped between two worlds, unable to love or belong to either one. 'Everyone has to look out for themselves and carve out their own future', he says. He is trying to find a path again, but I do not think he has found it yet. Instead, he seems haunted by his past, frustrated with his present and disillusioned about his future.

When he initially refused, the shop owner and his colleagues threatened to beat him up or even kill him. After he agreed to do it the first time, there was no looking back. It became a regular job for him. He was compensated very well for his delivery services. At around the same time, he started experimenting with the available drugs though he never got addicted to them. He explained that 'when I first tried ganja, I felt I had reached the cemetery'. He gradually got involved in carrying the load off the trucks which supplied Phensidyl from India and moved into the drug-trafficking ring. The gang even abducted girls and raped them, or trafficked them as prostitutes or domestic workers. They also trafficked arms, which were stored under a building. The Rapid Action Battalion (RAB)³ confiscated everything after a state of emergency was declared in January 2007.

Once he had earned the trust of the gang leaders he was put in charge of stock-keeping the supply and of smaller drug deals. He said he was put in charge because he was good at counting fast and taking the load off the trucks. However, he also claimed that he never wanted to be part of it, because all he remembers about it now is violence that was inflicted on him by the elders within the gang. If children tried to get out, they could be killed or disfigured if they were caught. He ran away for a while but the gang members found him and beat him up. They threatened to turn him over to the police. On the other hand, even his mother wanted him to remain in the business as it was a very good source of income. So he left his house in Gubibagh, where they had moved to after Mugda, and started living on the streets in nearby localities where his friends lived, so that the gang wouldn't find him.

Nonetheless, it was risky for him to be there as well, because of gang rivalries. As a known member of a rival gang, it was dangerous for him to stay in another gang's territory. Whenever he was spotted by anyone who was a potential threat to him or who would inform his gang he moved to another place.

While living on the streets, away from home, Ali was taken to Child Brigade (of which his brother Alam was a founding member) by one of its older members. Since it was difficult for him to leave the gang entirely, he was still a drug dealer when he first joined Child Brigade in 2003. Inevitably, his gang members found him time and again, but with the support of the organisation he was gradually able to move out of the main circle. However, in 2007, when the state was put under emergency rule and the RAB initiated a cleansing process to end the drug rackets he was able to completely leave the drug-trafficking business. 'Today, even if you gave me 10 *lakh takas*, I would not go back', he says.

Ali, however, believes the business will be back, especially once the RAB ceases to function and political parties return to power. According to him, quite a number of people in the community want the business back as they are without a livelihood now. It was the only livelihood they had ever known. He says the addiction to money is very hard to stop, especially when the entire social, political and economic structure of Bangladesh is based on money and power. As long as the state supports and thrives on corruption, violence and crime, it cannot come to an end. Until then, any form of social change will not be possible.

Notes

- 1 *Tokai* is commonly translated as ‘ragpicker’. Collecting waste items is one of the most common livelihood options available for children living in the slums and on the streets in Dhaka. However, they may also work as fruit or vegetable pickers and supply to the vendors in the market.
- 2 *Bhangari* are shops which resell the items collected by the *tokai* children. These are established within the slums where the children live.
- 3 The RAB is a collaborative effort between the Bangladesh Army, Navy and Air Force, the Bangladesh Rifles and the police. Under the emergency they have been given extensive powers by the army and caretaker government to maintain law and order in the country. There is no system of accountability for any deaths caused by the RAB.