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"As some of them introduced themselves as polling agents, I asked them about my serial number. They told me to come after lunch as they had not received serial numbers of smart card holders yet." So, Nilima went back to the polling centre again at 2:30pm. This time she was told by another polling agent that they would not be able to find her serial number as they did not have a computer with an internet connection. "And the EC would not send any more serial numbers as the election would end within one and a half hour," says a frustrated Nilima, who had no choice but to return home without casting her vote.

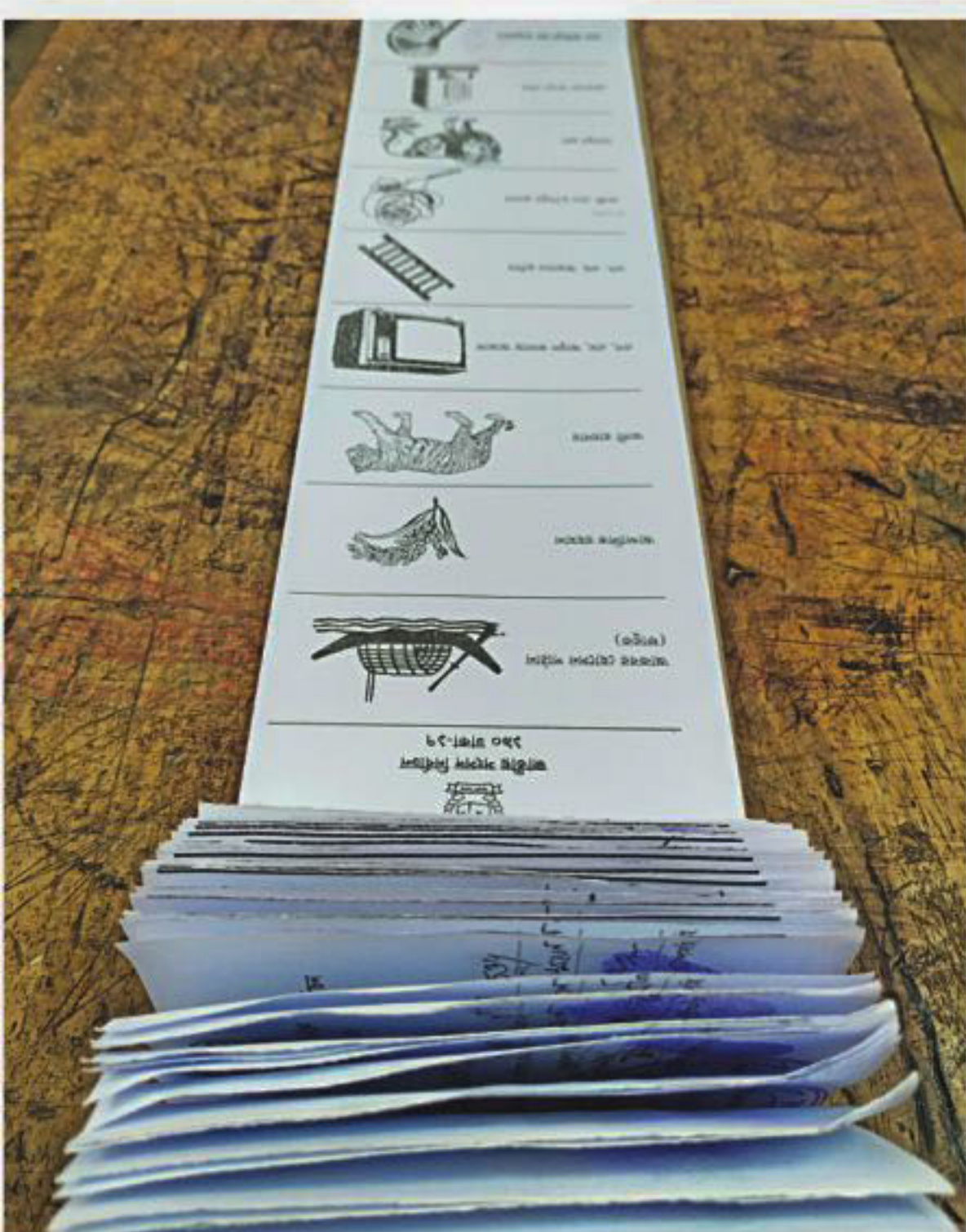
Nilima's friend Hafsa could cast a vote, but it wasn't hers! She, too, also unable to get her serial number from the EC's website and call centre, walked to a nearby polling centre herself. When she was about to be refused by the AL polling agents, one AL worker (who was not wearing an EC badge) rushed in. He said, "Why don't you allow this sister to cast a vote? She has come from a distant place just to cast a vote."

"Upon hearing his order, the agent quickly inked my finger without even asking me and then gave me the ballot book," she says, adding that he asked her to take the seal and cast the vote in front of him and two other AL men. "But I told



Unchecked crowd of ruling party activists inside the polling booths was intimidating for many voters.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN



The election was marred by allegations of vote rigging and violence.

PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

them that I needed to go to the secluded polling booth to cast my vote—they looked at me with such incredulity it seemed they had never heard of such an odd request. Then that AL activist intervened again and shouted at the agent, 'Let her go. Sister, you can go inside. Cast your vote to whomever you like, no problem'."

"I was literally at a loss. I am so sorry that it was my first-time voting experience and I don't even know whose vote I cast. I am so sorry for that," shares Hafsa.

Aaquib Md Shatil, an employee of an NGO, had to go to four polling centres just to get his serial number. "I remember when candidates from different parties would come to our house to provide us with a slip that carried a voter number and the name of the polling centre. But this year, no one even came asking for our vote, let alone give us a manifesto and slip. I went

to a local election camp of the AL and they couldn't even find my name in their list. I moved from one centre to another to find my serial number as I was determined to cast my vote," he says.

Not all young voters had his patience and determination, and were simply thrown off by the long and arduous struggle of obtaining a simple piece of information.

"This is absurd," said M Asaduzzaman, Joint Secretary of the Election Commission, when asked about this difficulty in obtaining serial numbers, told *The Daily Star*. "The polling officials at the polling centres are bound to provide voters' serial number when a voter comes at the polling centre."

Farzana Akhter, system analyst (data management) of the EC says, "Serial numbers and polling centres of the voters were actually registered into our database by the returning officers of the respective polling centres. If they fail to register it correctly or if they miss any information by mistake, the voters will not be able to get it."

*One can only hope that the unpleasant experiences of first-time voters in this election will not deter them from engaging in the political process.*

Meanwhile, irregularities with the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM), introduced for the first time in this election with the promise of better transparency in the election process, has left many young voters feeling confused.

EVMs were supposed to be activated only by the voter's smart card, voter number or national identification number. The polling officers would then match the photo with the voter's face and also take their fingerprint to complete the verification process. Nevertheless, voters, particularly young voters, were rejected, intimidated by, and fell prey to the ruling party activists in the EVM centres as well, according to reports from our correspondents.

Omar Faruk, a student of a private university, was a voter of Dhaka-13 constituency, and excited about casting his vote using an EVM. However, when he went to Mohammadpur Girls High School polling centre at around 12:00 pm, he found it closed. When asked why, AL workers guarding the centre told him that the EVM machines had stopped working.

Like Omar, many voters who came to vote at different polling centres of Dhaka-13 constituencies between 12:00 to 4:00 pm found them closed intermittently due to "malfunctioning EVMs" and had to return without voting. According to our correspondents, voting was stopped for two to six hours at a stretch in six booths of five polling centres of Dhaka-13 constituency.

On the other hand, Nawrin Ahmed, living in Khilji road of Mohammadpur area went to vote at Mohammadpur Central University centre where EVMs failed to recognise her fingerprint. "I tried thrice but it did not recognise my fingerprint. Then the polling officer accessed my profile with the help of the (assistant) presiding officer. The officer asked me to take help of a polling agent to cast vote saying, 'You have problems in your finger. She will help you to cast the vote.' I was about to protest but

two female polling agents pushed me and took me inside the room and pressed my finger on 'boat' without taking my consent. Seeing the polling centre full of AL activists, I did not protest but I was feeling really ashamed and nervous".

Nawrin's allegations were echoed by many voters who voted in the EVM centres. In some cases, after completing verification, they were told to take the "help" of AL activists inside the polling centre, who either forced them to vote for 'boat' or cast the vote themselves. In one instance, a voter named Sharmin Sultana, who went to vote at Sher-E-Bangla primary school in Khulna-2 constituency, showed the courage to say no when she was told to take the "help" of AL activist. As a result, AL activists dragged her outside the polling room and threatened her to leave the centre at once.

News reports from around the country highlight that polling agents from the Jatiya Oikyafront and other parties were non-existent at polling centres. Allegations of stuffing of ballot boxes, intimidating voters and vote rigging were rampant all across the country. At least 21 people have been killed during post-poll violence within two days of the election and a mother of four has been gangraped only because she cast her ballot for 'sheaf of paddy' and got into a scuffle with the AL activists. The Chief Election Commissioner, however, expressed "complete satisfaction" over this election and said, "We are proud of it."

One can only hope that the unpleasant experiences of first-time voters in this election will not deter them from engaging in the political process. If these citizens get disillusioned with the country's politics, particularly the electoral system, the future of Bangladesh's democracy will definitely be affected.

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