

After page 6

that intervened to ask why this building is yet to be constructed.

"The hawkers will cease to serve their purpose in that case. Hawkers belong to their own areas where customers can conveniently access them," says Murshikul Islam Shumon, the executive president of the hawkers' union.

"Hawkers are integral to the areas where they peddle goods. They are the ones who are on the street at a particular location for the entire day, so they can be formalised as the watchdogs for the area. Two years back, the government installed trashcans in all the blocks, but they quickly went stolen. The hawker sitting nearest to the trashcans could have been given the responsibility for making sure they stayed intact," suggests Sekandar Hayat.

"The first step to formalising the hawkers would be to draw up lists of how



Informal hawker markets and street shopping are essential to the city. PHOTO: PABU DAS

many there are in each area. They can be given hawker identity cards, and taxed by the government," he adds. "It is not as if hawkers don't already pay bribes to the police, so why can't they be taxed instead?"

In a press conference by Bangladesh Hawkers Federation (BHF) in 2014, their president MA Kashem had said that hawkers fall victim to extortion by police, criminals, city corporation officials and political party cadres. "There are over five lakh hawkers in the country and each of them on an average pays Tk 50 every day to linemen, who are private agents of extortionists," he had said, claiming that hawkers pay Tk 850 crores on average every year.

For a population that seems to unanimously purchase products from ferry-walahs, hawkers and street vendors, there is not a lot of thought to spare for these informal traders. In a news report talking about the recent round of protests, a reader commented, "First they do business illegally, then they ask for help from the government—this is a double loss for us. They should have thought twice about whether they are doing the right thing,

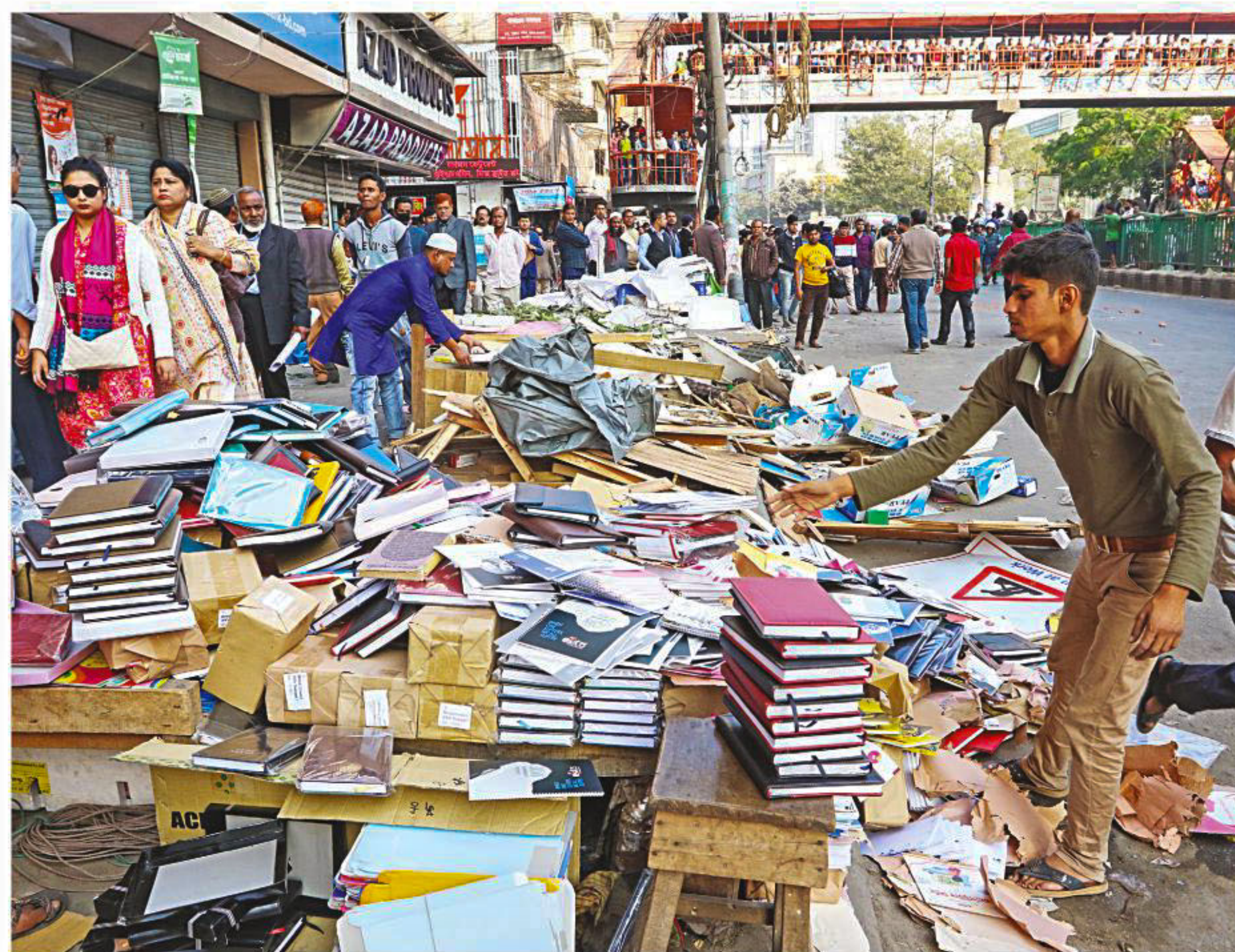
before taking over the footpaths."

This newspaper has also run countless letters from readers asking that the city be freed from hawkers. On January 10, 2019, just days before the hawkers started protesting, a letter was published with the headline "Free footpaths from hawkers" urging the government to clear up pedestrian walk-ways.

One needs to only look at the streets around New Market, Mirpur-2 or Gulistan to understand where the demands are coming from. Until very recently, when eviction drives were launched to clear public spaces, semi-permanent wooden structures erected by hawkers used to permanently occupy the majority of the sidewalk, or all the car parking spots on the streets. According to the Strategic Transport Planning Report of 2012, hawkers were present on 155 kilometres of sidewalks in the city—the total length

have emerged. As stressed-out students file out of the two private universities located there, the boys run up to them holding single sticks of cigarettes. The inhabitants of the neighbourhood have their nicotine-needs met, while the low-income boys make a few pennies. The whole spectacle is a reminder that urban planning routinely fails to take into account the needs of the humans who will inhabit the space.

The culture of having hawkers on the streets is not a new phenomenon in any country by any means. Other countries have formalised systems of holiday markets, night markets, and spaces for hawkers to peddle their wares. A 2019 article published in the journal of Asian Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities by Abontika Sara Israt, an assistant professor of Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology explores solu-



A hawker around Motijheel cleans up after law enforcers destroyed his books. Photo taken in 2017

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

of sidewalks available is 388 kilometres.

While it is easy to read this figure as footpath encroachment, it is also testament to how great the demand is for this informal market system.

I have two sources of shopping—online and footpath. Now, with everything from garden manure to groceries being available just a click away, physical shopping really has ceased to exist in my life. The only exception would be the purchases that are either immediately essential, unplanned, or previously forgotten about—limes and green chilies without which no Bangali meal is complete, hairclips and safety-pins that are constantly getting lost, and tart sour mangoes that are really just an impromptu indulgence.

That the demand exists can be seen most clearly in Bashundhara Residential Area. The private residential area does not allow any hawkers within its boundary. The ever-familiar multipurpose *tong dokan* that serve tea, sell cigarettes, supply rickshaw-pullers with drinking water, and recharge cellphones are curiously missing from the neatly blocked out residential neighbourhoods. With the absence of the *mama'r dokan* a group of fleet-footed boys with pockets crammed with boxes

tions to the hawker problem. The article draws an example with Singapore, where the street-food scene is so good it hosts a Michelin-star chef.

"Today, there are 107 hawker centres in the country which house about 15,000 stalls altogether. Their locations are near to transportation hubs and public housing lands. The government has plans to build 10 new hawker centres to add some 600 cooked food stalls in the next decade," the article states.

Meanwhile, as hawkers continue to exist in the city without formalisation, their resilience leaves a lot to learn from. Three hawkers used to operate plant nurseries in a little sliver of ground beside the Dhanmondi road number 32 bridge. The nurseries livened up the banks of the lake with mayflowers, lilies, bougainvillea, roses—until a few months ago, when they were evicted and the place was piled with construction materials and trash so that the hawkers could not return. Towards the middle of this week, the hawkers were back. They diligently got to cleaning the trash that is not theirs, while pots of bougainvillea waited patiently on the side, ready to reclaim the space, beautify the city a little bit more.