



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

A walk down PERFUME LANE

Perfume shops lining a stretch of road in the old quarters of Dhaka tell the fragrant tales of business, inheritance and nostalgia

DIPAN NANDY and ARAFAT RAHAMAN

On a Wednesday afternoon, we were walking along one of the dusty roads of Dhaka that everyone can easily imagine – a path littered with debris and puddles of murky water.

Attempts to navigate the alleyways under the relentless glare of the sun were tough enough. Still, combined with the cacophony of chiming rickshaws and yelling vendors, the experience caused a true sensory overload.

But as we trudged further into the Mitford area in the capital city, a strong aroma floated past, like a cool breeze offering relief from the heat.

The familiar smell of rose, jasmine, or tuberose was enough to make the slog through the messy streets feel like a walk in the park.

Soon enough we found dozens of shops, each overflowing with colourful glass bottles filled with perfume and attar, and the realisation dawned that the fragrance was not from a specific shop, but had wafted in from the hundreds of shops lining the road from the Babubazar intersection to Sir Salimullah Medical College Mitford Hospital.

They had stumbled into Mitford's famed perfume market, which stands as the sole wholesale hub for perfumes in Dhaka.

MULTICULTURAL ORIGINS

The exact origin of the perfume business in the area is unclear, but stories have been passed down through the generations.

According to various businessmen, the perfume business in Dhaka was initiated by non-Bengali businessmen in the 1940s. As demand surged, entrepreneurs from Madras (now known as Chennai), Karachi, and Bihar flocked to the region.

Initially, only three to four shops in the narrow streets catered to the needs of discerning Dhaka residents. But those humble roots paved the way for the future, with around 500 perfume shops in the area specialising in non-alcoholic perfumes now, according to locals.

OTTIS, THE BEGINNING

Wandering around the road, one may stumble upon a quiet pioneer: Otis Perfume House. Established in 1945, it stands as a testament not to just a business, but a dream born from an unfulfilled debt.

KP Mohammad, the Madras who founded the shop, came to Dhaka to claim money from a trader to whom his father had sold a consignment of perfumes. Unable to pay for the goods, the trader returned the consignment, and Mohammad decided to sell the goods in Dhaka instead of taking them back.

While selling them in a makeshift stall, he

Its current owner, Sarfaraz Ahmed, says that selling perfume is not a business for him, but more a matter of passion.

The middle-aged Sarfaraz's ancestors were residents of Lucknow and when they opened the business in 1960, it was named Lucknow Attar Factory. There were only four perfume shops in the area at that time.

The shop was later renamed Khushbu Perfume House. They had businesses in Dhaka and Lahore, and Sarfaraz's relatives in Pakistan are still running the business under the name Khushbu Perfume House, he said.

Farhan Perfumes mainly sells attar. However, it does not produce the items. Rather, it imports perfumes from India, Spain, and France.

EYE-POPPING PRICE TAGS

Mitford's exterior is somewhat coarse. A world of exquisite, high-end perfumes hides within.

While budget-friendly options abound,



PHOTO: ARAFAT RAHAMAN

“The perfume business in Bangladesh will never stop. I think this business will grow bigger by the day. But for that, we have to sell the right quality of products, a trader says

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conceived the idea of opening a proper store and thus Otis was born. The rest, as people say, is fragrant history.

Now run by Mohammad's grandsons, Otis carries the torch of tradition with a modern touch.

One of the current owners, a representative of the third generation, KP Saif Ali, said: "Otis started its journey on 6 Mitford Road. The head office is still situated there."

The company also sells items online. It mainly produces perfumes but also offers essences and incense.

"Whether you are in front of a mosque or at a shopping mall, you will find our products in any perfume shop in Bangladesh," Saif added.

Otis now produces 20 to 25 types of perfume. Its most popular perfumes are 'Darbar' and 'Kasturi' with each bottle priced at Tk 45 an ounce.

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FARHAN PERFUMES: A WHIFF OF LUCKNOW
Adjacent to Otis stands Farhan Perfumes.

with Darbar at Tk 45 per ounce and classics like Kasturi and Jannat similarly accessible, Mitford also caters to clients seeking drops of opulence.

The aroma of exclusivity can be found in stores like Otis, where a single millilitre of Sylheti agarwood perfume demands Tk 900.

But that is only the tip of the iceberg.

Brands such as Arosha, Aasil, Alf Zahura, Al Faris, Choco Musk, Fawakeh, Royal Mirage, Salma, Sultan, and Vicky, fetch between Tk 6,000 and Tk 10,000 per litre, the same price bracket that white Oud is found in.

But the true crown jewels of Mitford's perfume scene are Ehsas Al Arabia and BR 45, priced at a breathtaking Tk 24,000 per litre. Black Oud, with its potent allure, is priced at Tk 20,000.

"These are for those who treat perfumes as an indulgence, not just a necessity," said Sayed Anwar, a local businessman.

He added that these were "statement pieces" and "aromatic signatures".

Most of these fragrances are imported from India, France, and Switzerland, according to Shafikul Islam Milon, general secretary of the Bangladesh Chemicals and Perfumery Merchants Association.

Is Mitford's fragrance fading?

ARAFAT RAHAMAN and DIPAN NANDY

While a walk through Mitford is an unforgettable treat for the olfactory senses, there are ill winds threatening to blow over those sweet scents and the businesses that produce them.

Although the market was bustling with activity in its halcyon years, it now caters to a niche and is finding itself adrift as it contends with a lack of customers.

Both newcomers and established businessmen say the perfume business is not doing well.

Competition from mass-produced brands is one significant impact, especially given the former's marketing budgets. They also offer perks such as lower prices, convenience, and brand recognition.

At the same time, consumer preferences have changed. The younger generation prefers body spray or branded perfumes rather than what is on offer in Mitford.

Marketing campaigns by companies such as Axe have long won over teenagers while those in their twenties or thirties would rather spend their money on a Ralph Lauren or Calvin Klein perfume from a reputed shop.

Now, as one vendor puts it, mostly elderly or religious people buy attar.

Another issue is that the number of businessmen has increased, intensifying competition and chipping away at profits.

Syed Anwar, a senior businessman and head of Lahore Perfume House, said: "The business is a bit slow now."

He, however, hopes that the business will pick up in the month of Ramadan. This is because



attars have been considered for centuries to be something that attracted angels and warded off evil spirits.

Anwar's father started the business in 1952 and he himself has been involved since 1981.

"I have seen many ups and downs during my time."

He adds that many shops selling substandard products have sprung up here. "Because of this, we are in a bit of trouble. But we have maintained the quality."

From Babubazar's Sir Salimullah Medical College Mitford Hospital to Armanitola, there are 2,000-2,500 shops selling perfumes, according to Shafikul Islam Milon, general secretary of the Bangladesh Chemicals and Perfumery Merchants Association.

"Of them, more than 500 are located in the Mitford area. All of these shops sell imported perfume oils. There is no place for adulteration here." If anyone does it, they now buy it and make it themselves.

He says many businessmen from Gujarat and Madras in India came here before Independence and started businesses. Later, Bangladeshis joined them.

Regarding the current business scenario, Milon said because of the higher cost of living, people now have less money to spend on luxury items.

"As a result, our business is somewhat on the decline."

Bangladesh has been witnessing a higher level of inflation for the past two years owing to external and internal factors, eroding the purchasing power of people.

"We sell only imported perfume oils here," said Md Mamun, owner of Moonzia Traders.

People come from all over Dhaka and other parts of the country to buy products since they know that they can find the best items they are looking for.

"Many people buy products from here for personal use as well. And once they start buying perfume from here, they don't go anywhere else."

On a recent Wednesday, the road was bustling with customers. One of them was Mosharraf Hossain, who was looking for an attar with the scent of Mysore roses.

He said, "My ancestors used Mysore roses, and so do I. I'm buying an ounce for Eid." Sakib Kaiyum, a resident of the capital's Mirpur, shared similar sentiments.

"I've been buying perfume from here for years. You can find the right product at the right price."

Mohammad Jahalam Mia, a trader, had also come to buy attar, but not for himself. He buys perfumes for his retail store.

"From Shab-e-Barat to Eid, a lot of attar is sold," he said.

The actual size of the perfume market in Bangladesh is hard to come by.

In 2024, the revenue in the fragrances market, which includes the consumer market for perfume and any other fragrances, in Bangladesh is projected to reach \$1.42 billion, according to German data services provider Statista.

It is anticipated that the market will experience an annual growth rate of 3.67 percent between 2024 and 2028.

"Despite its growing middle-class, Bangladesh's fragrance market is still largely dominated by affordable, locally-produced options," Statista said.

