



SHOPPING IN DHAKA

a trip down memory lane

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I heard a friend say that no matter where she goes shopping, be it on 5th Avenue in New York, in old Delhi, or even at Chatuchak Weekend Market in Bangkok, nothing beats the pleasure she finds shopping in Dhaka's shopping districts: Chandni Chawk, Hawker's, and New Market.

I thought about it – the sentiment does have substance. The Dhaka city shopping precinct houses Dhanmondi Hawkers Market, Gausia Market, Chandni Chawk Market, Balaka Cine World, and Nilkhet Book Market, all adjacent to each other. This designated shopping quarter of the city alone has the oldest shopping area, the famous New Market, established in 1952 on 32 acres of land.

The vibrant space of New Market deserves a feature on its own. The tall arched gates of the New Market lead to vast interiors that are crisscrossed with several courtyards, footpaths, and shops, selling anything from art collections to sarees. There is a mosque inside and a car park outside in this beautiful low-price souk for people from all walks of life.

At Dhaka's historic New Market, the chief attraction might as well be its history, its famed past – that unmissable sense that generations of Dhakaites have stepped through its gateways in search of good bargains.

The memories of shopping for schoolbooks, stationaries, and backpacks, during the back-to-school time at the end of December or early January would mean browsing through comic books like Archies and Russian folklore.

My father and I would invariably drop in on the timeworn bakeries of Dhaka, like Ananda and Olympia for pasties, cake slices, boutique toffee, and a bottle of fizzy drinks. And return home with books, bags

of ghee toast, Horlicks biscuits, fruit cakes, and hot patties.

At a later age, New Market meant retail establishments such as Khan Brothers, Matching Centre, trusted watch and eye frame stores, and trinket shopping from the sidewalks inside the arcade.

The adjoining shopping precincts were diverse as well, with boutiques, restaurants, and complexes set only for grocery and kitchen markets, in addition to covered passages for foreign crockery and household accessory stores.

This shopping district is typically pedestrian-oriented, with street-side buildings, and wide sidewalks filled with pop-up stalls of everything from wooden blocks to lace and benarasi sarees, it is that diverse.

"This wedding season, I garnered the courage to brave the traffic and go to Chandni Chawk – a place close to my heart. This, I did, after having failed to meet my dress-making errands at reasonable prices in all those fancy city malls. I took this trip maybe almost 25 years after my last visit. The place changed from how I remembered it as a teenager, yet the true essence of Chandni Chawk remained intact.

"I used to frequent this place, always with my cousins. Every time we received a pay slip from doing odd jobs, like translations or transcriptions, we went on a shopping spree. Buying fancy linen print yards, matching pant materials,

matching slippers, trinkets, all within Tk 500 was the ultimate fun. We were ready for our dates and family gatherings. This was the time when we needed something new to wear on every occasion. We had our favourite stores where we availed bargain buys. The recent visits brought back memories of those rickshaw trips, chilled lassi and a plate of crispy fuchka and crunchy jilapis," says N Mansoor, a corporate executive.

"I miss the New Market of my childhood days," says 73-year-old Hasna Ahmad, "My sister and I would sneak out of college to shop at the various sari shops in the market. The shop keepers were extremely cordial, greeting us with cold drinks, paying close attention to our wants, quite unlike the unprofessional treatment meted out by stores nowadays."

Hasna fondly remembers the cream rolls of the only bakery situated in New Market at that time. The rolls were a novelty of sorts in the country then and only a few bakeries would make these delicious treats.

"I would often throw a fit if my father didn't get cream rolls for me from New Market's Olympia Bakery. My sister branded me as the spoilt one but I wouldn't care and my father had to give in," laughs

Hasna.

Let's not get into Hawker's market this time around, I will only say that the place is a treasure trove of deshi and Indian saris. It is a must-visit for our expatriate Bangladeshi to stock up on the latest saree trends, while Bailey Road sari stores were exclusively for our Tangail sarees – shop after shop lining either side of the road offers you any colour or design imaginable.

Bailey Road is a one-stop shop for almost any sari that you are looking

for and especially prides itself in the abundance of local saris.

However, when Eastern Plaza, the first-ever modern shopping mall established in Dhaka during the 80s, was opened to the public, we all rushed to it for all its fancy décor and the thrill of air-conditioned mall shopping.

This was located beside the Hatirpool Bazar, and stores selling imported goods were all the rage at that time. I forgot the name, but the place had a paper store that offered

hand-made coloured paper for gift wrapping, book covers, notebooks, and all fancy stationery. It was unthinkable in Dhaka at that time, so the unique store was very popular.

Old shopping areas like Elephant Road had Dhaka's most favoured stores, like Musko shoe store, the first departmental store of the town.

The area also catered to those with a taste for tradition, featuring shops that sold exquisite brass items and intricate wedding accessories. These stores were a go-to destination for families preparing for weddings and cultural events, offering timeless pieces that held cultural and sentimental value.

In addition to traditional wares, Elephant Road was a haven for media enthusiasts. Video rental shops and cassette recording stores flourished here, serving as cultural hotspots for music and movie lovers.

Adding a touch of modern sophistication to this vibrant mix was Cats Eye, the city's first boutique experience store for men. Known for its trendy and high-quality clothing, Cats Eye quickly became a favourite among fashion-conscious individuals, introducing a new wave of style and retail innovation.

Just like these places were to the eighties Dhaka crowd, Baitul Mukarram shopping place was for seventies Dhaka. My parents' weekend meant a trip to the Stadium Market for electronics and Baitul Mukarram for everyday utilities.

This nostalgic trip to early Dhaka's shopping experience reminded me of how life was before this current online shopping experience. I am sure someone years later will muse about e-commerce, but for now, a high-five to the old shopping district of Dhaka.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

