



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS



Nilkhet: where stories once lived

HASAN MEER

Nilkhet is not merely a name on Dhaka's map; it is an emotion. A place steeped in layers of memory, significance, and quiet reverence for the book lovers of this bustling city. Nilkhet book market was a treasure trove where the curious minds of Dhaka came to seek knowledge, stories, and dreams. Those narrow, serpentine alleys lined with shelves brimming with second-hand books offered a kind of solace that only the faint rustle of old pages can provide.

For generations, Nilkhet symbolised more than just commerce -- it was a rite of passage. "I used to come here with my father," recalls Ahmed Hasan, a banker who still cherishes those memories. "He would buy me books... I would get Bangla comics like Betal, Mandrake, or Nonte Fonte. Unfortunately, I cannot do that with my son anymore as they don't really have any such books for children."

Once upon a time, the market catered to diverse literary tastes. From Tin Goyenda to Masud Rana, from Archies to Tintin, Nilkhet was where fables and

adventures found eager readers. Classics stood alongside dusty Sheba Prokashoni paperback and English literature, while comics were stacked high, waiting to ignite young imaginations.

These days, however, the market wears a different face. Guidebooks for competitive exams -- BCS, MBBS, and university admissions -- have taken over. Vendors sell what the people demand, and sadly, that no longer includes novels, poetry, or whimsical comics.

"Nilkhet is not the same," says Shahana Azim, a retired professor of Bangla. "Books are not found here anymore; instead, there are notebooks and guidebooks. It feels like the heart of Nilkhet is missing."



For vendors like Sajib Bhuinyan, it's a matter of survival.

"We sell guidebooks because that's what customers want," he says with a resigned shrug. "Not many people look for novels or poetry anymore. We do have some English fiction, but they don't sell much."

"The transformation of Nilkhet reflects a broader shift in society's priorities. The relentless pursuit of grades, jobs, and material success has eclipsed the unhurried joy of losing oneself in a story. Those who still visit for fiction or poetry now scour the pavements, where a few lucky finds might linger, hidden on the bottom shelves or in shadowed corners," says Rosa Akter, a research coordinator at an NGO.

And yet, amidst the overwhelming

presence of guidebooks, there remains a whisper of what Nilkhet once was. The nostalgia lingers like the faint scent of ink on weathered pages. It is a place that still holds the echoes of laughter and discovery, of fathers passing down the gift of reading to their children, of afternoons spent hunting for that one elusive title.

In the words of Gabriel García Márquez, "What matters in life is not what happens to you, but what you remember and how you remember it." Nilkhet, in its current state, may no longer be the same dreamscape it once was, but in the memories of its visitors, it is still a sanctuary of stories. And as the sunlight filters through the gaps between the tin roofs and the book-lined paths, it's hard not to believe that somewhere within its labyrinth, the soul of Nilkhet still endures.

The days of finding dreams in its dusty alleys may be gone, but the longing for those simpler, story-filled times remains eternal. For those who knew it in its glory, Nilkhet will forever be more than a market -- it will be a chapter of Dhaka's heart.

EU warns Russia of sanctions over any attack in space

AFP, Brussels

EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas said yesterday the bloc could hit back with sanctions against any attacks in space, pointing to hostile actions by Russia.

"We are already the targets of hybrid warfare. Including in space -- with systematic jamming of satellite navigation signals," Kallas told a conference in Brussels.

"There are risks to our satellites, the ground infrastructure, and our space industries from kinetic, electronic, and high-energy weapons.

1st phase

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The followers of Maulana Saad will offer their Akheri Munajat on February 16, said Mohammad Sayem, media coordinator of the Saad faction of Tabligh Jamaat.

This is the first time the first phase is going to be held over six days with two concluding prayers.

Meanwhile, Inspector General of Police Baharul Alam yesterday said he hoped that the 58th Biswa Jitema will be held peacefully.

Speaking to reporters after inspecting the Jitema ground, the IGP said that an unfortunate incident took place over this Jitema, but both sides have shown responsibility.

The IGP gave updates on the tightened security measures, saying, "The security system and technology are much better now ... Rab is still involved in the security work. We are ready to deal with any kind of sabotage or unpleasant incident."

Gazipur Metropolitan Police Commissioner Nazmul Karim Khan said, "We have held a coordination meeting with the city corporation, deputy commissioner, Roads and Highways Department, fire service, army, and Rab. After the meeting, we completed the overall security arrangements for the Jitema."

He added that police would monitor the venue with drones so that they could take quick action if any incident occurs.

"We have implemented a five-layer security system. Every inch of the ground will be monitored from 16 watchtowers and through 335 CCTV cameras. We will keep law enforcers on duty on 35 rooftops and 20 check points. We will have 20 mobile teams to ensure that no one can occupy the footpath. We have placed 6,000 uniformed police personnel inside the ground," he said.

On December 18 last year, at least four people were killed and 50 others injured in a clash between the two factions of Tabligh Jamaat over control of the Jitema ground.

ACC seeks info on public servants

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sector remains exempted, letters have been sent requesting information on all government employees, public representatives, judges, and commissioned officers in the armed forces who obtained the citizenship of another country," said the official.

Asked, another official said judges of any division of the Supreme Court is covered by the letter.

In the letter, the ACC said a number of unscrupulous officials and employees are "concealing information and obtaining passports from foreign countries..."

To cover up their misdeeds and evade punishment, these officials are residing in foreign countries using the passports of those countries, it said.

The letter said, "With multiple passports, these officials are transferring abroad wealth acquired through corruption and are enjoying the wealth there. The ACC's investigation has found such evidence."

The commission said such activities not only promote corruption in the country but also harm the economy.

After acquiring foreign citizenship, the officials appear reluctant in discharging their duties, it added.

The ACC said it issued the letter empowered by section 2 of the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1947, section 110 of the Bank Companies Act, 1991, and section 21 of the Penal Code.

It said all commissioned officers in the armed forces, court employees and judges, government employees receiving salaries from state revenue, officials and employees of autonomous, semi autonomous, and state-owned companies, and elected public representatives at various levels are public servants.

The commission urged the authorities to be mindful of the dual citizenship issue while appointing people to jobs.

Asked whether ministry employees would voluntarily disclose their dual citizenship status, a secretary,

speaking anonymously, told The Daily Star that such information is rarely provided willingly.

However, the ministry will seek information from all employees and forward the collected data to the ACC, he said.

Badiur Rahman, former chairman of the National Board of Revenue (NBR), told The Daily Star that taking strict action against government employees with dual citizenship is a good move.

"However, the approach of the government raises doubts. Corrupt officials will not admit to wrongdoings. The government should collect information and dismiss these corrupt individuals from service. Sending letters in this manner will only alert them instead," said Badiur, also a former secretary.

According to the Statistics of Government Servants 2023, the number of posts in the revenue sector is 19,16,519. At least 14,43,518 officials and employees are currently in service.

CPD paints bleak a picture of economy

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Mustafizur Rahman, a distinguished fellow at the CPD, said the think tank had been consistently calling for an increase in the tax-to-GDP ratio for years. The country's development activities have become increasingly dependent on debt due to the low tax-to-GDP ratio.

However, increasing tax revenue through higher value added tax (VAT) may worsen the situation for people already struggling to cope with high inflation, he said.

"It was a great opportunity to increase direct taxes and reduce tax evasion," he said, referring to the timing of the interim government's formation after the fall of the Awami League regime.

He said the government should take appropriate measures to curb tax evasion because the government receives only a portion of what people are supposed to pay.

Answering a question regarding low investment amid political uncertainty, Mustafizur said political instability is not the sole deterrent to investment.

"If uncertainty were the main reason, then why did investment not increase over the past 10 years when the Awami League government continued without political instability?" he asked.

If a conducive environment for investment is created -- such as a one-stop service and adequate infrastructure -- investment could flow in, the economist said.

"If we cannot provide a one-stop service, if we cannot ensure gas supply, and if we haven't set up an ETP [effluent treatment plant] in Savar over the last 10 years, then how can we expect investments to come in?"

Political and economic reforms must go ahead in parallel, which is a medium-term process, Mustafizur

said. Meanwhile, the country should transition to a democratic process within the announced timeframe, he said.

"In that case, what is necessary is political consensus to continue the reform process, which would be a significant achievement of the July uprising," he added.

While discussing the CPD's assessment, Fahmida said total revenue collection recorded an "extremely low" marginal growth of 3.7 percent during the July-October period of FY 2025.

Inflation was higher in rural areas than in urban areas for 16 out of the last 21 months (from April 2023 to December 2024), which is particularly concerning, as purchasing power in rural areas is already low, she said.

In a positive development, export performance during the first half of FY 2025 indicates not just high growth, but also an increase in domestic value retention. However, export earnings continue to be volume-driven.

Thanks to high export and remittance earnings, the balance of payments situation and overall external balance are now in a relatively better position. Diversification of export destinations and goods could provide further stability, Fahmida said.

Regarding remittance growth, she said the reduction of informal hundi transactions after the July uprising has led to more remittances coming through official channels. However, remittance earnings are still low compared to the overall export of manpower.

About the recent increase in VAT, she said it would place an additional burden on the people.

The digitisation of the tax system could help raise revenue, and efforts should focus on curbing tax evasion, Fahmida said.

"Spiralling debt has trapped the power and energy sector in a vicious cycle that will likely persist."

She also said the government must continue its efforts to cut unnecessary projects. Nearly completed should be prioritised to ensure their quick completion.

The CPD provided seven recommendations to address the economic challenges. These include prioritising the prevention of tax evasion, limiting tax avoidance, and strengthening compliance systems to create a more inclusive fiscal base and reduce revenue leakage.

It recommended limiting intermediaries by connecting farmers directly to buyers, and regulating the hoarding and stockpiling of rice.

Given the changed global and regional trade dynamics, renewed efforts should be made to tap into the export potential of neighbouring countries in South Asia, East Asia, and South East Asia by pursuing free trade agreements and comprehensive economic partnerships.

The CPD also recommended designing a subsidised credit facility with lower interest rates to support Small and Medium Enterprises.

A proper estimation of annual rice demand is crucial, the report said. Additionally, a specific two-year plan should be developed to end the rising debt cycle that has entangled the power and energy sector.

Furthermore, the think tank recommended freezing the bank accounts of wilful defaulters and their immediate family members, liquidating their assets and temporarily nationalising their businesses.

Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director of the CPD, was also present at the event.

Rail services resume

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The announcement came following the assurance of Railways Ministry Adviser Muhammad Fouzul Kabir Khan meeting the workers' demands.

From Dhaka, Dhumketu Express left Kamalapur Railway Station for Rajshahi at 6:30am, said Station Master Anwar Hossain. Other scheduled trains also left the station, but some were running late, he said.

Bangladesh Railway Director General Afzal Hossain said some trains were delayed as it took time for the workers on strike to get back to work.

"We hope the service will be normal within tomorrow [today]," he told The Daily Star yesterday evening.

The government has withdrawn the ceiling on the special remuneration the newly recruited assistant locomasters (assistant train drivers) get for their extra work.

The finance ministry issued a circular in this regard yesterday. It was one of the major demands of the train workers.

Railways Ministry Secretary Fahmimul

Islam confirmed the development to The Daily Star.

Currently, the assistant locomasters get 100 percent "running allowance" (a special allowance for their additional work), but the allowance is capped at their monthly basic salary.

Secretary Fahmimul said after yesterday's circular, that cap has been removed, allowing them to be paid as much as their additional work.

Meanwhile, the union yesterday received the minutes of the meeting held in the wee hours of yesterday. The minutes say that the locomasters, who joined the service before 2022, will get all the benefits, including those they will get after retirement.

"All of our colleagues have joined work as our demands were met," Saidur Rahman, acting president of the workers' union, told this newspaper.

Locomasters (train drivers), guards, and some others staffers observed the nationwide work abstention from early Tuesday for the special allowance after retirement and other demands.

Polls may come sooner than later

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that's not feasible as HSC and equivalent public examinations usually begin in April. These exams take around a month," said a top EC official.

Top officials of the commission explained it is customary to avoid dates that conflict with public board exams, religious festivals and weather conditions.

Chief Election Commissioner AMM Nasir Uddin on Sunday noted that Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus said the next general election could be held at the end of this year or in the first half of next year, depending on the reforms political parties agree to.

If the election is to be held in December, all preparations, laws, and regulations must be finalised, and necessary arrangements must be made by October, he said, adding, "May-June is the rainy season. Polls have not been held during this time in the past."

Election Commissioner Brig Gen (ret'd) Abul Fazal Md Sanaullah on Tuesday was more precise when he said preparations for the national election are underway targeting December.

Senior EC officials further mentioned it would be tight for the commission to hold the election before December, as there is a long "to do list".

The commission will have to update electoral rolls, complete delimitation of constituencies, register new political parties, set up voting stations, organise a panel of polling officials, and, if necessary, amend electoral laws, they said.

Adding to the complications, the EC must await the outcomes of the reforms proposed by the reform commissions to determine the extent of changes required to electoral laws and logistics, if any. Until these reforms are finalised, the EC cannot proceed with full-scale preparations for polls.

CEC Nasir Uddin on Sunday said tasks like demarcation of parliamentary constituencies and political party registrations take time. "The commission has received numerous applications for

delimitation, but it is unable to start working in this regard due to legal issues.

"Still, we're confident. We have to overcome these challenges. We're doing our preliminary work and homework so that as soon as the rules of the game are fixed, we can jump into action."

He added that the EC has also begun the new voter registration process.

POLLS OF THE PAST

Bangladesh has witnessed 12 national elections since independence.

Of them, only two -- in 1986 and 1996 -- were not held in the typically dry months between October and March. Since the restoration of democracy in 1991, six of the seven national polls were held in winter.

The first national election in independent Bangladesh was held on March 7, 1973. The next was held on February 28, 1979, and the third on May 7, 1986.

The fourth parliamentary election was held on March 3, 1988, and the fifth general election on February 27, 1991, under an interim government.

The sixth parliamentary election was held on February 15, 1996, and the seventh on June 12, 1996, under a caretaker government.

The election to the eighth parliament was held on October 1, 2001, the ninth on December 29, 2008, and the 10th on January 5, 2014.

The 11th parliamentary polls were held on December 30, 2018, and the 12th on January 7, 2024.

The seventh general election was held on June 12, 1996, barely four months after the sixth election, as the Awami League and other opposition parties forced the BNP-led government to step down and hand over power to a caretaker government to conduct the election. Opposition parties had boycotted the February 1996 election.

As Bangladesh inches closer to the election season with some political parties' calls for polls growing louder, the current situation points towards an election coming on soon.

Israel delaying aid delivery to Gaza

Say Hamas officials, warn it could impact release of hostages

AGENCIES

Two Hamas officials yesterday accused Israel of delaying the delivery of vital humanitarian aid to Gaza, as agreed in the ceasefire deal, and warned that it could impact the release of hostages.

"We warn that continued delays and failure to address these points (delivery of key aid) will affect the natural progression of the agreement, including the prisoner exchange," a senior Hamas official told AFP.

Another Hamas official said the group had asked mediators to intervene in the issue. Both spoke on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the matter. Israel, however, dismissed the accusations, and said it had received a list of hostages, held by Hamas, to be released today as part of a ceasefire agreement in Gaza.

Israel, backed by Washington, will cease contact with the UN's Palestinian humanitarian relief agency (UNRWA) and anybody acting on its behalf, its UN envoy said Tuesday, drawing condemnation from aid groups.

The UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini told the Security Council on Tuesday that implementation of a ban on the UNRWA in Israel -- due to start today -- will be disastrous, reports Reuters.

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will meet with President Donald Trump at the White House on February 4, the two governments said on Tuesday.

The meeting is set to take place amid a fragile six-week ceasefire that has brought a temporary pause to 15 months of fighting between Israel and Hamas in Gaza.

Trump told reporters aboard Air Force One on Monday he wants Egypt to take in Palestinians from the enclave, where much of the population has been displaced by Israel's military onslaught.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio told Egypt's foreign minister on Tuesday it was important to ensure Hamas can never govern Gaza again, the State Department said.

Since the ceasefire deal took effect last week, at least 376,000 Palestinians displaced by the offensive have returned to northern Gaza, the UN's humanitarian body OCHA said later on Tuesday.

In the occupied West Bank, the Palestinian health ministry said that Israeli forces killed two people in separate overnight raids, including one in Jenin, where the Israeli military is conducting a major offensive.