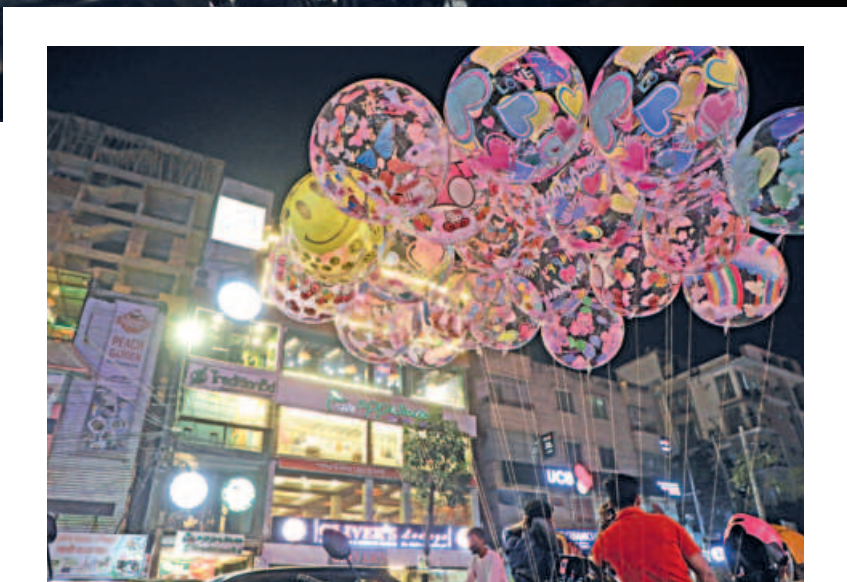




THE CHANGING FACE OF KHILGAON

From sleepy suburb to a hotspot for business, dining and lifestyle

PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS



MD ABU TALHA SARKER

Picture a street with more than 300 eateries, lined with customers waiting in long queues to secure a table at their favourite spots, where a coffee can cost from Tk 80 to Tk 300.

The hustle and bustle of these cafes and restaurants is matched equally by the surrounding area, home to lifestyle outlets and educational institutions.

You may be thinking that such a hotspot for businesses is likely located in an upscale neighbourhood, perhaps Gulshan, Uttara or Dhanmondi.

can observe the rapid growth and diversification of Khilgaon's business scene. There are about 25,000 restaurants in Dhaka, with thousands having sprouted up over the past decade to cater to the demand for hygienic food among city dwellers.

On a broader scale, there are 4.81 lakh restaurants across the country employing about 30 lakh people, according to the Bangladesh Restaurant Owners' Association (BROA).

About two crore people are either directly or indirectly linked to industry, as per BROA data.



identity. Mahtab Uddin, chief barista at Apon Coffee House, shared his perspective on the cafe's success, saying, "Apon Coffee House has set a standard for the restaurant business in this area. Many other businesses have followed in our footsteps, but the competition is fierce. Some have done well, while others have struggled to keep up with rising operational costs."

Alongside western cuisine, local delicacies also abound.

Harvagar Mor, just a stone's throw from the Khilgaon flyover, is known as "biryani para" due to concentration of eateries that offer the popular dish. Among them, Mukta Biriani Ghar stands as the oldest, with its history going back 30 years.

Saidur Rahman Bappi, proprietor of Mukta Biriani Ghar, shared that they started their business with dishes like 'gorur chap', slabs of marinated meat that are fried, chicken biryani and slow-cooked beef and goat liver.

"We later expanded our menu to include kacchi biryani, tehari, and mutton khichuri. We also prepare

Currently, there are over 19 educational institutions in the area.

"I've witnessed the area's growth firsthand," he said, adding that the real transformation began about 10 years ago with the establishment of educational institutions. "What was once a quiet residential neighborhood with only a few schools and colleges has now become home to a wide range of educational institutions."

This expansion of educational opportunities in Khilgaon has attracted a large student population.

Additionally, global cosmetics brands like Herlan, Flormar, and Moon's Gallery have opened outlets in the area.

Tahira Binte Zaman often visits the Herlan outlet with her friends. She shared that she enjoys shopping, having coffee, and more at this location.

"It's been great to have a place like this for shopping and hanging out. We come here with no particular reason, just to enjoy ourselves," said Zaman, a second-year student at Habibullah Bahar College in Shantinagar.

Lamiya Jannat, a staff member at

growth of Khilgaon has not come without its challenges. One significant issue is the rising cost of rent and operational expenses. As businesses in the area have flourished, so too have the costs associated with running a commercial establishment.

Business owners in Khilgaon are feeling the impact of soaring rent prices and rising security deposits. Some businesses, including those that were once staples in the area, have been forced to adapt their business models or relocate to more affordable locations.

Md Abdus Salam, owner of "Karim Books and Stationery," which he recently transformed into "Karim Live Bakery," shared his experience.

"I've been in this area for over 30 years. The business landscape has changed significantly. Rent prices have increased, and many businesses have had to adapt to survive. We had to change our business model to stay competitive."

The high cost of rent has forced many business owners to either downsize or switch to more profitable ventures. For instance, a former bookshop near Khilgaon's main road was replaced by a bakery, a more sustainable option given the rising rent and changing customer needs. Pointing to a building that once housed Faizur Rahman School, Salam explained that the owners previously received Tk 3 lakh in rent from the school, but now they are getting Tk 4 lakh per floor.

Businesses like Cielo Rooftop, Kuddos Fun, Elysian Cafe, Skinologic Laser & Aesthetic Centre and others have taken the school's place. High inflation and political instability have also negatively impacted businesses, with inflation showing few signs of relief.

In January this year, inflation reached 9.94 down from 10.89 percent, driven by soaring food prices, particularly for rice and vegetables, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

Imran Hassan, secretary general of the BROA, said no restaurant in the Khilgaon zone is a member of the association. They carry on their own course of action, he added.

Zakaria, chairman of the Bangladesh Food Safety Authority, said none of the restaurant hubs in Dhaka are monitored separately. However, they have plans to establish a green zone, under which they will provide training to restaurant staff on food safety and include them in a monitoring system.

Mohammed Alim Akhter Khan, director general of the Directorate of National Consumers' Right Protection, said they conduct regular drives so that the consumers' interests are not affected.

Raids have also been conducted in Khilgaon zone at different times in the past. If anyone complains, an operation is conducted, he added.

After raids, restaurants found guilty are fined and checked through follow-ups, he continued.

Many banks establish their branches and ATM booths to ensure that customers can carry out financial transactions smoothly and securely. An official from Dhaka Bank PLC mentioned that around 13 branches of various banks are located in the area. For those without branches, ATM booths have been installed to facilitate easier transactions.

Khilgaon's transformation from a quiet residential neighbourhood to a thriving business hub is a testament to the dynamic changes happening in Dhaka. With its growing population of students, young professionals, and families, Khilgaon has become a center of commerce, education, and entertainment.

The presence of part-time workers, especially students, is another important factor in Khilgaon's business boom. Many young people balance their studies with part-time jobs, helping to meet the growing demand of the coffee shop and restaurant culture.

But this is the reality of Shaheed Baki Sarak, which stretches along the heart of Khilgaon, a locality in the eastern part of Dhaka that was little more than a modest suburb.

One person who could testify to this transformation is Ikhtedar Uddin Akib, a final-year student of Bengali literature at Dhaka College.

Akib's and his family have lived in Khilgaon since 1989, witnessing the neighbourhood's significant evolution firsthand. In those days, the idea that he would be able to pop over to a popular franchise such as KFC was little more than a fantasy. But now, he regularly takes his beloved uncles, aunts, grandparents and cousins to prominent coffee shops or restaurants in the area.

Akib, who balances his studies with a part-time tutoring gig while also helping his father manage business, finally settled upon one of the more popular haunts in Khilgaon, PizzaBurg.

This simple anecdote not only highlights not only Akib's personal experience, but also reflects the broader changes in the socio-economic landscape in the area.

At PizzaBurg, Akib's family was seated and quickly began sipping on coffee. After settling in, Akib – who is also quite the social media enthusiast – took the chance to snap a few pictures with his siblings at the restaurant's photo corner, creatively decorated with a variety of colorful flowers.

"We often come here with friends to have coffee," the 23-year-old said.

He also mentioned that he often enjoys pizza. "When I eat pizza, I prefer it with white sauce. It's my favourite, I prefer it much more than red sauce," he added.

"Everyone, especially my nani, really enjoyed the pizza," he continued. "She is definitely looking forward to coming back."

This small, family-oriented outing serves as a lens through which we

In Khilgaon, around 8,000 to 9,000 people are employed by such businesses, with PizzaBurg being just one example.

According to Abdullah Al Noman, head cashier at PizzaBurg's Khilgaon branch, the restaurant can seat up to 100 customers, making it a popular destination for locals and out-of-townners alike.

The venue frequently hosts social events, including get-togethers, engagement parties, birthday celebrations, and family reunions, highlighting the central role of such establishments in the social fabric of the neighbourhood.

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Among these workers are Rifat Rahman Gazi, a BBA student at the University of Information Technology and Sciences (UITS), Ajanta Ema, who studies at Tejgaon College, and Rifaz Rashid, who is pursuing studies at the Independent University of Bangladesh.

They serve as members of the waitstaff, with Rashid acting as the team leader. Gazi, who has been working at PizzaBurg for nearly two years, expressed his satisfaction with his job, saying, "It's a great group to work with alongside my studies. I enjoy being here, and I feel it's a great learning experience."

Such trends are not isolated to PizzaBurg, with other popular eateries like Apon Coffee House, Domino's Pizza, Kacchi Bhai, Kebab Station, BFC, KFC, Secret Recipe, Herfy, Cielo, also becoming central to the area's business ecosystem.

Apon Coffee House, a pioneering cafe that opened in 2006, is another local establishment that has become an integral part of Khilgaon's evolving



special food items based on a seasonal basis. For example, during the winter season, we make dishes with pigeon and duck meat," he said.

But restaurants and cafes are not the only businesses thriving in Khilgaon. Lifestyle outlets such as fashion stores and beauty salons have also proliferated, adding to the area's economic vitality.

For example, Sailor, a popular clothing store, has witnessed strong sales growth. Ahmed Sumon, a BBA student from Barishal who works as a sales manager at Sailor's Khilgaon branch, explained, "We're preparing for summer season, as winter season is about to finish."

"Customers buy jackets, hoodies, and other winter wear. We will pull winter wear off our shelves soon. The summer stock has just arrived. We're expecting a surge in sales in summer," he added.

These are not only places to enjoy a meal or a shopping spree, but also social spaces where students and young people can gather, study, or unwind after a long day of classes. This is indicative of the changing lifestyle in Khilgaon, where a younger, more dynamic population is driving the demand for modern retail and hospitality services.

Md Helal Uddin, proprietor of Islam Brothers, which has been in the area for nearly 30-35 years, said the presence of educational institutions was a key factor in Khilgaon's transformation.

