

Vanishing Livelihoods

The Pen Engravers and Repairmen of Bangladesh



The country's only surviving 'Pen Hospital', located in Baitul Mukarram.

AMAIN BABU

There was a time when pens had "health issues" and needed to be taken to the "Pen Hospital." These were makeshift roadside stalls or small shops where skilled artisans—pen repairmen and engravers—restored broken nibs, leaky reservoirs, and cracked barrels with careful precision. Especially in Dhaka during the 1970s and '80s, these craftsmen were a common sight.

The popularity of fountain pens, dip pens, and felt-tip pens gave rise to this craft. Repairmen sat near busy areas like Chawk Bazar, Baitul Mukarram, Patuatuli, and the courts, armed with wooden boxes or briefcases filled with tools. Using discarded or broken pen parts, they could assemble a new pen—often from scratch. Yet, despite their skill, these artisans never gained formal

recognition as a distinct profession.

In Europe, the equivalent was known as a "pen maker and engraver." While South Asia lacked such a title, the roles were similar. Some repairmen specialised in polishing or engraving names on pen bodies, watches, and even bicycles. Young students, eager to mark their belongings, would get their names engraved—paying a modest fee per letter. These artisans were affectionately called "pen doctors" or "pen engineers."

In cities like Dhaka, Rajshahi, Pabna, and Rangpur, pen hospitals often emerged near major colleges. Many repairmen also ran small shops selling pens and ink. Others were itinerant, visiting schools and offices in search of work. One would hear school caretakers call out, "Kids, the name-writer is here!" Middle-aged men with dusty briefcases

would set up just outside school gates, offering engraving and minor repairs. The most artistic part of their work was name engraving. Using tools like miniature chisels and handheld hammers, they would etch names

into plastic or metal pen surfaces with astonishing accuracy. Some even offered engraving in Bengali, English, Urdu, or Arabic. The tools they used resembled thin pens, each suited for different materials—watches, nameplates, or pen bodies. With the spread of ballpoint pens in the mid-1990s, demand plummeted. School corridors that once bustled with children queuing to engrave their names on fountain pens fell silent. Still, a few continued to adapt. Mohammad Shahab Uddin Mir of Kishoreganj, now in his late 60s, began in 1982 under the guidance of his uncle. Today, he etches names onto mobile phone covers and motorcycles instead.

to refer to such artisans as "nokkashi" or "nakashi"—terms not widely used elsewhere.

There's evidence that similar "pen hospitals" existed outside Dhaka. In 1962, one such shop opened in Pabna's Indrapatti area, near Edward College, and continued operating until 2005. Students not only bought new pens there but also repaired their old ones.

While engraving was beautiful and affordable, pen repair was often costlier and more time-consuming. In the 1980s, engraving might cost Tk 2, but repairing a fountain pen could cost anywhere between Tk 5 and Tk 40. Curious schoolboys would often gather for hours just to watch the intricate work.

Pen engravers and repairmen gradually disappeared with the rise of mass-produced plastic pens and digital writing. However, a few names still persist—Abdul Quddus and Mohabbat Mostafa in Dhaka, and Imtiaz Ali and Dilip Basak in Kolkata. They are among the last to carry the legacy of this profession, holding onto their craft despite minimal demand.

There were always two kinds of craftsmen—those who could engrave and those who could repair. But the few who mastered both were rare and revered.

Today, pen repair may be obsolete, but engraving survives in fragmented form. Fountain pens still exist as luxury items, and some enthusiasts continue to seek out these artisans. Government offices and courts once had regular ink and pen vendors who often doubled as repairmen. In Dhaka's New Market or Gulistan, names like Khokon, Kalam, and Shafique were once well-known.

As digital communication dominates and handwritten letters fade away, the memory of these pen artists—engravers and repairers alike—deserves to be preserved. They were more than craftsmen. They were the guardians of tools that shaped ideas, carried knowledge, and recorded history.

Amain Babu is a journalist and researcher.



Dhaka's legendary repairman, Mohabbat Mostafa (L), with his mentor, Abdul Quddus (R).

Ophthalmology & Hospital (NIOH), explains: "Pellet or gunshot wounds to the eye often cause irreversible damage on the very first day. Recovery is slow and staged—many cannot expect full restoration."

Prof Dr Md Shafi Khan, Cornea Specialist and Phaco Surgeon at Bangladesh Eye Hospital & Institute, adds: "If the damage is minimal, vision may be recoverable—sometimes with a cornea transplant. But if internal structures are severely harmed, treatment is much more difficult and full recovery unlikely."

Caught in Bureaucratic Limbo
Many victims report not receiving promised hospital bill reimbursements, despite commitments made in February. One-time grants and monthly stipends were also announced, but as of May, remain only partially implemented.

Victims were categorised by injury severity to guide relief efforts, yet many remain misclassified and denied appropriate support.

Md Shahinur, who lost one eye and has blurred vision in the other, was placed in Category B. He continues to petition for reclassification to Category A, but the process is slow and marked by poor coordination and limited empathy.

Others, like Ashrafur Islam, have paid out of pocket for their treatment and weren't even aware of the promised aid. "I was ill and couldn't collect the information about the disbursement. Others got it, I didn't," he said.

This raises a crucial question: should victims, already suffering physically and mentally, be expected to chase down financial aid?

Where Is the System?
Md Faruk Hossain, Joint Secretary and

In-Charge of the July Mass Uprising Cell at the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs, stated, "One-time allowances of BDT 2 lakh, out of the approved BDT 5 lakh, have already been disbursed to Category A and B victims in most divisions—except Chattogram and Rangpur."

He added that disbursement in those two divisions would begin the following week. "Monthly stipends will commence in July," he said.

For those with urgent needs, such delays only deepen their suffering.

"Frequent queries, incomplete victim information, and the absence of a streamlined system have caused delays—despite our best efforts," he noted. "In many cases, victims cannot be reached even after multiple attempts. Limited formal education among some also complicates communication."

The Dignity They Deserve
Every victim interviewed expressed the same needs: a monthly stipend, lifelong free treatment, and recognition. What they've received instead are fragmented support measures and delayed promises.

Md Mijanur now depends on loans from relatives. His most urgent need? A proper house. "I had to stop construction after losing my job. If the promised funds were released, I could have finished it."

Others, like Shahinur, are still fighting for basic dignity. "Correct my category. Give me the allowance. I'm not asking for luxury—just survival," he said.

The Time for Action Is Now
As the dust of political change settles, these victims remain caught in a humanitarian vacuum. A centralised rehabilitation programme, coordinated across ministries and grounded in transparency, is urgently needed.

While efforts may be present, the ongoing delays continue to compound the challenges. "Many issues have emerged now—injured victims are protesting, some getting aggressive," says Nusrat Jahan, student representative at CMH appointed by the Health Ministry. "This could have been avoided had prompt action been taken from the beginning."

Dr Choudhury echoes the call for long-term support: "These patients require lifelong care—treatment may continue for years."

Miftahul Jannat is a journalist at The Daily Star

Left in the DARK

Eye Victims of the July Uprising



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

MIFTAHL JANNAT

Nine months have passed since the July Uprising, yet its human toll continues to surface—survivors left scarred, jobless, and crushed by mounting debt. Among the most visible yet overlooked are those who lost their eyesight—many now living with permanent disability and fading hope.

Their stories go beyond physical injury. They reveal gaps in state support, bureaucratic delays, and a deeply unjust aftermath.

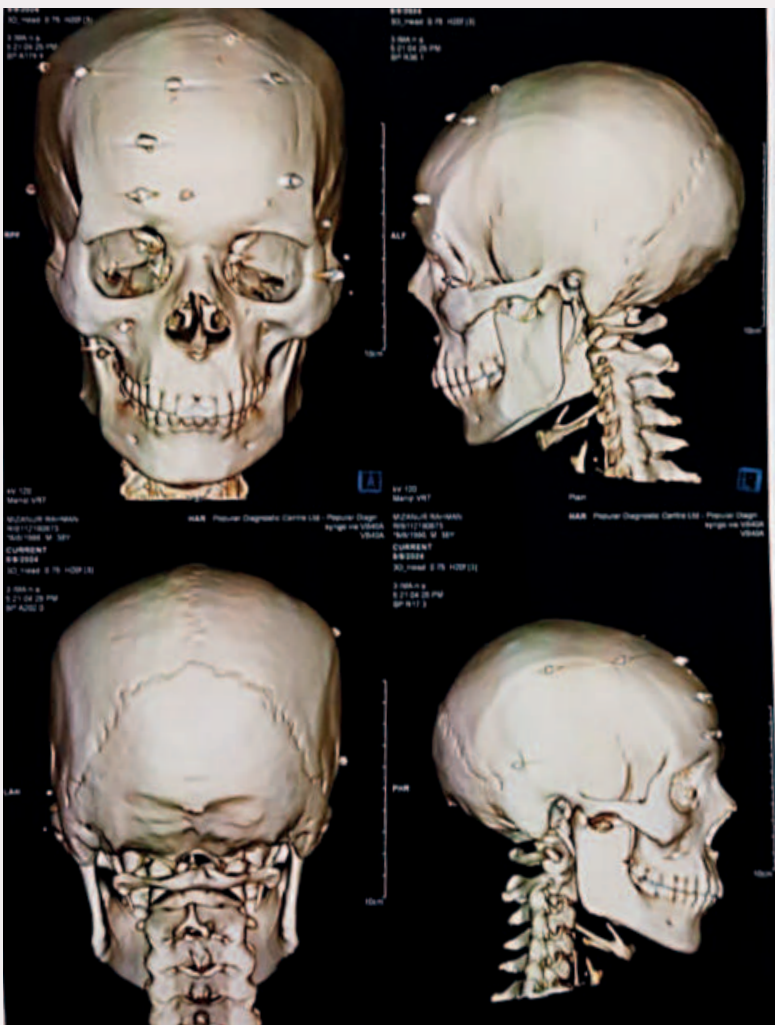
Visible Wounds, Invisible Burdens
Md Shahinur Miah was shot in both eyes during the uprising. Even after seven surgeries, one eye is completely damaged, and the other has only blurry vision. Formerly an auto-rickshaw driver and the sole breadwinner of his family, Shahinur now lives in darkness—both literally and economically. He sold his vehicle to keep his family afloat. "Sometimes, I feel like a burden," he said. "There are nights I think of ending it all."

He isn't alone. Md Mijanur Rahman Badol has undergone multiple operations and is burdened by growing debt, despite receiving some grants from the government and civil society. These funds are fragmented, delayed, and often inaccessible without relentless follow-up. Despite his growing debt, he still has to spend thousands just to reach Dhaka for treatment.

Another victim, Syed Hasibun Nabi Raju, Savar correspondent for Maasranga Television, sustained gunshot injuries while covering the events of 5 August. He still has 92 pellets lodged in various parts of his body, including his eyes.

"I'm surviving with my left eye. My right eye is completely gone. Even with the left, I can only make out outlines—I can't recognise faces," he said.

Dr Khair Ahamed Choudhury, Director of the National Institute of



COURTESY: MD MIJANUR RAHMAN BADOL

A CT scan reveals the silent agony—like many other victims, Md Mijanur Rahman Badol still has gun pellets lodged in his face and skull.