

MY DHAKA

A WALL'S EYE-VIEW diary of a neighbourhood

MANNAN MASHHUR ZARIF

Every locality in this city has stories, and none seem to speak louder than the anecdotes shared by walls! Case in point: Shantinagar! Having lived here for over four decades, I am no stranger to the tales they offer, and curiously, these narratives are ever-changing.

As a child, I witnessed the fall of the Ershad regime. Once the dictator was removed from power, the entire neighbourhood came alive with graffiti boldly championing change. The shift in the political landscape was evident simply by looking at the walls.

The area's status as an electoral hotspot meant its plastered boundaries remained a vibrant canvas for "chikamara" (the term locals used for graffiti) even after the downfall of autocracy.

With the advent of technology, these were replaced by posters, sometimes making their point in simple topography and, at times, with grotesque imageries of things done wrong to people with opposing views. [Of course, graffiti came in the limelight once again after the fall of the Hasina-regime. The slogans this time were not just political, but at times, deeply personal, turning every brick into a bulletin board of public dissent.]

In my teens, I began to notice things more seriously. One of the more familiar sights back then was the crowd that gathered around walls with daily newspapers glued on the plaster. Here, you did not just read the headlines, you also got unsolicited commentary from



PHOTO: MD MONOWARUL KABIR MILON

the person beside you, and a regular dose of conspiracy theories from "analysts."

Now in my mid-forties, I spot office-goers dressed in crisp shirts, pressed trousers, and formal shoes, pausing at the same corners jotting down bits of information. Fast forward to the 2020s, the walls has embraced new messages.

The newspaper section is gone and at every turn, you will find flyers offering rooms for rent. No surprises there, but there's a catch!

The "to-let" notices rarely advertise full apartments anymore. Instead, they seek tenants for single rooms or shared mess seats at affordable prices. The ads are simple, no frills; just a brief line and a phone number. Some are "For men only," others "For females," and

every now and then, you come across a sign declaring "Only Family" with such urgency, it feels like the wall itself is shouting, "Bachelors not welcome!"

Amidst the sea lie the curious renegade; advertisements for the proverbial *ghotok* (matchmakers) and their modern-day competition, matrimonial websites. There is also the poster for the Kazi, government endorsed agents who scribes the marital document, the kabin-nama. I shudder at the thought of the "tantrik-sadhu" making his appearance, promising cure to marital discord and a lot of earthly problems!

Of course, there are also the run-of-the-mill advertisements of coaching centres. From offering to preparing students for madrassas and cadet

colleges to medical and university admissions, every inch of wall space seems to be taken.

Some promise miracle IELTS scores in just three months, results that seem achievable by none but the most proficient in English. Others promise you to teach Korean at Farmgate!

And then there are remnants of advertising trends that never caught on. The "Manobotar Dewal" initiative, launched during the pandemic, encouraged residents to hang their used clothes on the walls for the less fortunate to take. Now, only the words and hooks remain, reminding us that in a city that has now turned cold, humanity makes a comeback only in times of peril.

I have always believed that you can measure the economic condition of a neighbourhood by the stories its walls share. And in Shantinagar, it's clear that the hard realities of life are leaving its mark. After all, it is no longer an affluent part of the city, now mostly called home by the burgeoning middle-class.

The modest, time-worn walls call upon the residents of this locality to hear their stories, and while doing so, echo the voices of the very people that they themselves were built to guard.

PS: In a way, the walls have now moved online. Facebook groups and messenger threads dedicated to Shantinagar are now "plastered" with the same notices, tuition ads, lost-and-found announcements for cats, pest control, and coaching centre promotions! It's as if the walls have taken to the Internet, and still screaming just as loudly.

Robbers attack ambulance carrying body; 9 hurt

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Brahmanbaria

A group of armed robbers attacked an ambulance carrying a deceased cancer patient in Nasirnagar upazila of Brahmanbaria early yesterday.

Failing to extort their desired amount of money and valuables, the assailants attacked the family members with sharp weapons and even allegedly struck the corpse, leaving at least nine people, including the driver, injured.

According to police and victims, the incident occurred around 1:00am at Tilpara area under Burishwar union. The deceased, Sabdar Ali of Purbobhagh union, died while taking treatment at Dhaka Ahsania Mission Cancer Hospital.

Shortly after his death, his body was being transported home in an ambulance when the vehicle was intercepted by a gang of robbers.

The robbers had blocked the road by felling trees, forcing the ambulance to a halt. They then attacked the vehicle, vandalised it, and assaulted the passengers. The robbers looted nine mobile phones and around Tk 50,000 in cash from the grieving family members.

"The robbers were enraged as we couldn't give them more money," said one of the victims. "They even struck the body of our father with local weapons. It was inhuman."

Additional Superintendent of Police (ASP) Tapan Sarkar of the Sarail Circle said, "The area is considered high-risk, and locals have been advised to inform police before travelling at night so that security protocol can be arranged. Several people were injured, and mobile phones were snatched. We are conducting drives to arrest those involved."

Trump fires new tariff threats at Apple, EU

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump yesterday ratcheted up the US trade war, threatening to impose a new 25 percent levy against Apple, and a 50 percent tariff on the European Union.

Lamenting that negotiations with the EU "are going nowhere," Trump said on Truth Social that he is recommending "a straight 50% Tariff on the European Union, starting on June 1, 2025."

If the new duties come into effect, they would dramatically hike the current US baseline levy of 10 percent, and raise economic tensions between the world's biggest economy and its largest trading bloc.

In a separate message, the president said Apple had failed to move iPhone production to the United States despite his repeated requests, and he threatened new duties of "at least" 25 percent if they did not comply.

Govt to recast social safety net schemes Please don't resign

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every budget, but the amount is insignificant. "Will they be able to buy anything additional with the increased sum?"

Finance ministry officials said revenue earnings of the government remained low, while it had to spend a large amount on interest payments, subsidies, and salaries and allowances. As a result, it is difficult to significantly increase the allowances under the safety net schemes.

The government is likely to allocate Tk 52,366 crore for 38 schemes meant for the extreme poor.

Of the schemes, the largest programme is the "Old Age Allowance", introduced in fiscal year 1997-98 to provide social security to the elderly people who are poor and unable to earn.

Under this scheme, the monthly allowance next year will be increased by Tk 50 to Tk 650. Earlier in 2023, the allowance was Tk 600 a month per person and it remained unchanged despite high inflation.

In the next budget, the government will raise the number of new beneficiaries under the Old Age Allowance programme by 100,000.

The number of beneficiaries of the programme was 60.01 lakh. In the current budget, Tk 4,350 crore has been allocated for the programme.

The government's second largest safety net programme is the "Allowance for the Widow, Deserted and Destitute Women" programme.

From the next budget, the monthly allowance under the programme will be increased by Tk 100 to Tk 650 while the number of new beneficiaries will be increased by 1.25 lakh, in addition to the existing 27.75 lakh.

Launched in 1998, this programme has been supporting women in rural areas in alleviating their poverty. In the current fiscal year, Tk 1,844 crore has been allocated for the programme.

Under the "Allowance for the Physically Challenged Persons" scheme, the monthly allowance will be increased by Tk 50 to Tk 900 per person in FY26. Besides, 2 lakh new beneficiaries will be added to the existing 32.34 lakh.

In the current budget, Tk 3,321 crore has been allocated for the scheme.

Meanwhile, under the "Improvement of the Livelihood of Bede, Hijra and Disadvantaged Communities" scheme, beneficiaries would receive Tk 650 a month instead of Tk 600.

The monthly allowance under the "Mother and Child Benefit Programme" scheme, will also be increased by Tk 50 to Tk 850, while

the number of beneficiaries will reach 17.71 lakh, up from the existing 16.50 lakh.

The government will provide rice to 55 lakh families at a low price under the "Food Friendly Programme", with 10 lakh tonnes of rice to be distributed in the next financial year.

For the current financial year, 760,000 tonnes of rice have been allocated for 50 lakh families.

The families would be able to buy 30-kg rice at a low price for six months instead of five months.

Under the "Employment Generation Programme for the Poorest", the government now provides Tk 200 a day as wages to beneficiaries for a maximum of 40 days a year.

The daily wage will be increased to Tk 250, while the number of beneficiaries will reach 6 lakh, up from the existing 5.18 lakh.

Selim Raihan emphasised the need to increase per-person allocations to ensure that social safety net assistance has a meaningful impact on beneficiaries' lives.

"Extensive research has been conducted on the challenges facing our social safety net programmes and the measures required to address them. I hope the upcoming budget