

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 will reflect some of them and move in the right direction."

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the unpalatable ones.

His life-long service for the poor through microcredit – a poverty alleviation idea that the world adopted and replicated – which not only made "credit a right" but also opened up the possibility of unleashing the entrepreneurial urge of every human being and make them self-employed; his basic urge to build a less unequal society through social business and his dream of building a sustainable planet through implementing "Three Zeros" made him the darling of the world and an iconic figure of the future.

But none of the above – along with the laurels, the large number of globally coveted medals, the plethora of the honorary "doctorates", the endless streams of accolades – prepared him for even one day's running of the government.

Normally running a government is difficult. Running the government of a country like Bangladesh is even more so and running it after dismantling a government that destroyed literally every institution of governance – parliament, judiciary, police, bureaucracy, intelligence agencies etc – is almost absurdly difficult. It is at that moment Prof Yunus answered the call of the students which, in effect, represented the call of the whole nation. Thus, he was welcomed overwhelmingly especially because people wanted a way out from the dark abyss in which we appeared to have fallen with no end in sight.

Students dug the tunnel, political activists held the lamps, people joined in streams and gave their lives and we suddenly saw the dawn. It was at that moment that Prof Yunus appeared to steward our future. Given his global standing and his personal acceptability he appeared as our saviour. But he should have set his "terms" as he accepted his insurmountable task. He should have demanded that while he would serve the "new generation" – they are not all knowing and all wise as they later started to be – and that they will also have to listen to him. As he stepped into the muddy of waters of running a

government and murky environment of politics he lost touch with the world of reality and practically and became totally swayed and enamoured by those whom he called "his employers".

This is not the time to pass any judgement on Yunus's government but suffice it to say that 10 months is not a short time for a government whose very name, "interim", suggests the transitory nature of its tenure. He chose an inexperienced – not all of them – team and did not run it like a hands on commander. Crucially, some of his advisers got too used to power and started focusing on extending its tenure rather than finishing the task in hand. An unnecessary dichotomy was created between "reforms" and "election" which this paper consistently stated that both were possible within the time frame of December '25.

As of now we have consensus between the major political parties on some major issues like independence of judiciary, bicameral legislature, reconfiguration of power of the PM and president, two consecutive terms for the PM, etc. These are not trivial reforms. To these, some can still be added and an impressive charter for July can be made.

Regrettably a serious gap has been created between the biggest existing party, BNP, and the interim government which should not be allowed to widen further. We believe that Prof Yunus – unlike some of his advisers – is fully committed to elections not beyond June. A discussion between him and the BNP leadership can bring the two sides closer. Widening this gap cannot be good for either side as other disruptive elements are waiting in the wings.

Outline below is what may be considered as some of the immediate steps:

– Hold a meeting of major political parties and declare an election date. What has been said months ago – Dec '25 to June '26 – needs to be updated.

– Reshuffle and re-orient the cabinet to deliver some specific goals within the time frame agreed to by political parties.

– Call the chiefs of the three forces and reduce the gap that appears to exist. The army chief's complaint of not engaging the armed forces on national security issues deserves the CA's attention and can be clarified easily as the former is fully committed to a democratic transition. The "corridor" issue should not be dealt with lightly and the confusion it created cannot and should not be brushed aside.

We conclude with the plea that Prof Yunus remain the man of the hour and he cannot and should not abandon the nation at this stage. He has to lead us to the election and power transfer to an elected government. We are willing to accept the blame that may be the media and the people have failed to fully appreciate what Prof Yunus has achieved in the last 10 months but he must equally be open to admit that his government has indeed made some serious mistakes. He has to recognise that Bangladesh, in recent months, appears more and more like a country without law and order, where street demonstrations and obstructions of traffic for a few days is the way to get your demand whether justified or otherwise, where business people are suffering from lack of confidence and that hardly much investment has occurred in spite of the showmanship of an engaging presenter.

This is the moment of truth for Prof Yunus. It is unlike anything he has faced ever in his illustrious life. We request him to consider that no political party has yet demanded his departure save a section of the students – whom he has given all his support – who showed the temerity of saying "Remember we brought you to power and we can remove you also". We still have faith in him, believe in him and trust him. But Prof Yunus has to realise that if things have not gone the way he wished and for getting them back on the right track, he needs to reform his team and reconsider the methods he has so far applied. Heads of governments always do so. There is nothing wrong in it and it definitely should not be taken personally.

Only election roadmap will ease tensions

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on a roadmap for justice, reforms, and polls is necessary to overcome the current uncertainty as quickly as possible and pave the way for a democratic transition.

"There is no alternative to achieving political consensus on this matter," Ganosamhati Andolon said in a statement last night.

It also said national unity is essential for a peaceful democratic transition following the July uprising. "Without it, the nation will lose its way."

The Ganosamhati Andolon, along with the BNP and several other parties, had participated in simultaneous demonstrations against the previous Awami League regime.

BNP leaders also had discussions with the Jamaat-e-Islami regarding the current situation.

According to the sources, the BNP had planned to meet Yunus last Wednesday following a decision taken by its National Standing Committee amid protests by BNP leader Ishraque Hossain's supporters, who demanded that he be sworn in as Dhaka South City Corporation mayor in line with a court order.

They wanted to discuss Ishraque's issue, along with other current

political matters.

However, the meeting did not take place despite multiple attempts, the sources said.

The BNP had prepared a written statement to present at the planned meeting.

As the meeting did not take place, the BNP held a press conference at the party chairperson's Gulshan office on Thursday.

At the press conference, BNP Standing Committee member Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain reiterated the party's demand for an immediate announcement of a roadmap for a free, fair, and inclusive national election by December this year.

Otherwise, he added, it would be difficult for the BNP to continue its support for the interim government.

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir also stated that the only way out of the current political crisis is to promptly declare an election roadmap, as further discussions are pointless. "Reform is a continuous process," he added.

Asked about the matter, a BNP Standing Committee member said, "We don't want to agitate against this government. But whenever we bring up the election issue, they

ask for time. How much time? This December or June next year? This must be clarified."

As the protests for Ishraque's oath was raging, the National Citizen Party launched demonstrations demanding the reconstitution of the Election Commission for alleged bias towards the BNP.

The NCP also pressed for the July Declaration during the demonstrations.

The Jamaat has demanded a referendum to validate that Declaration. The BNP, however, questions why a new declaration is needed when the country already has one from 1971. There were previous uprisings in 1975 and 1990, but no one called for such declarations then, BNP leaders said.

According to the BNP, the demand for a new declaration aims to erase the legacy of the Liberation War and obscure the crimes of 1971. Therefore, the party will not be part of any such move.

Party leaders also said army chief General Waker-Uz-Zaman's recent remarks about state reforms, the national election, and mob justice reflect the sentiments of the public and signal the need to hold the election.

officers and soldiers must be ready to protect sovereignty and Bangladesh," he wrote.

Meanwhile, Islami Andolan Bangladesh Ameer Syed Muhammad Rezaul Karim in a statement said the mass uprising had given the nation an opportunity to rebuild the country through policy, legal, institutional, and administrative reforms.

"This opportunity must not be wasted, and all parties involved in overthrowing fascism must act responsibly and cautiously."

He said that political parties have their demands and interests, but they must refrain from exerting pressure on the interim government to reach their goals. He urged parties to shun the confrontational political culture.

The chief adviser must carry out the crucial task of reform to honour people's sacrifices, he wrote.

"Disregard any pressure, non-cooperation, or obstacles from any party or individual and remain steadfast in fulfilling the responsibilities....," he added.