



Dhaka's silent sole keepers COBBLERS OF THE STREET

JANNATUL BUSHRA

In Dhaka, we live almost a vertical life! But there are some who habitually don't look up -- because their eyes are trained to stay on the ground, scanning scuffed heels and frayed straps, through which they are able to read the city's pulse. They are Dhaka's silent foot soldiers: the cobblers!

Sitting quietly by the roadside, surrounded by scraps of leather, worn-out shoes, a few tools, and an unyielding determination to make things last, these men (and sometimes women) patch up our soles while the world rushes past.

They work with a hammer, a thread, and a faith that not everything is disposable -- not yet.

On a busy corner of Jigatola, where Jigatola Boro Masjid meets the old Kacha Bazar, you'll find Shyamol Das, a middle aged man who can't quite tell his exact age, but he's been around long enough to know a thing or two.

Sitting cross-legged on a battered scrap of cardboard, with a hammer in one hand and a torn sandal in the other, Das grins as he says, "I've been at this for as long as I can remember. My father did it; my grandfather too. We fix shoes because, you see, a man's character is like his shoe."

He taps the sandal for emphasis,



PHOTO: JANNATUL BUSHRA

adding "Once it's broken, people start looking down on you. My job is to make sure no one's character falls apart."

For over 16 years, Das's world has been stitched together in the narrow rectangle of the roadsides. Sometimes here, sometimes there. His gaze, like that of most street cobblers, rarely rises beyond the few inches in front of him.

Yet, within that small frame, he carries the weight of generations, quietly patching lives together.

"We see the world from the ground up," he says, while polishing another pair of shoes. "It's a different city when you're looking at it from here. People's shoes tell their stories -- who is struggling, who is running late, and who can afford the fancy brands."

Just like Shyamol Das, Dhaka has so many other cobblers who are scattered across the arteries of the city -- Nilkhel, Mirpur, Badda, Mohakhali, Gulshan, Dhanmondi, and Motijheel -- just name

a place, and they're there!

They crouch beside electric poles, on sidewalks shaded by banyan trees, or at the edges of rickshaw stands. And what of their customers? A colourful parade -- rickshaw pullers, office workers, students, and sometimes, even a flustered female executive whose brand-new shoe betrayed her on the first day at her dream job.

Life isn't quite exactly smooth for these sidewalk saviours. They have to dodge city corporation evictions, endure the occasional wrath of the police, brave the monsoon's mood swings, and juggle rising material costs.

They might appear as invisible fixers, but their invisibility doesn't mean insignificance. For every pair of shoes mended, there's a story: a job interview saved, a school exam not missed, a festival not spoilt by a broken strap.

As Das hammers the final nail into a worn-out slipper, he smiles. "People walk miles in these shoes, chasing dreams, fighting for their families. I just help them keep going."

People like Shyamol Das are the city's repairers -- not just of shoes, but of lives in small ways. When someone can't afford a new pair, they make the old pair work. When a journey threatens to end with a broken strap, they step in. Their hands hold together the threads of resilience.

Budget 'realistic, pragmatic'

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Despite constraints, the government has opted not to pursue a highly expansionary fiscal path. "We've heard talk of high growth for years. But who has actually benefited?" Salehuddin said. "We want to improve the quality of life, make living easier for ordinary people, raise purchasing power, and ensure that business and trade can thrive. That's the focus of this budget."

BLACK MONEY DEBATE

Salehuddin also addressed the politically sensitive topic of black money, saying the government was weighing both the ethical and economic implications of legalising undeclared income.

"There are two sides to this," he said. "One is the moral question -- should we even allow it? The other is practical -- will it help us collect more tax revenue?"

While the budget does not offer blanket amnesty, it includes limited provisions for legalising undisclosed funds in real estate. "This isn't a free pass to whitewash everything," Salehuddin clarified. "For example, if you build on your own land, you will have to pay a specific amount. That's been formalised."

The adviser rejected the notion that such measures signal a policy failure. "We're not saying it's a good thing to whiten black money. But sometimes you have to look at it sector by sector," he said. "There may definitely be something to consider regarding the whitening of black money -- we will evaluate what can be done."

Amid criticism of the black money provision, Abdur Rahman Khan, chairman of the National Board of Revenue (NBR), said the government could reconsider it if necessary.

The finance adviser pointed to several policy initiatives targeting underserved groups. "Bangladesh Bank has set up a large fund for women entrepreneurs. We are allocating money for startups and for the youth. These are steps toward inclusive development."

INSTITUTIONAL REPAIR

Salehuddin placed particular emphasis on rebuilding damaged institutions, especially in the financial

sector. "Many institutions were either broken or deliberately weakened. Even capable people cannot function if the structure around them is hollow."

The adviser said Bangladesh Bank, under its current leadership, was taking action to trace and recover laundered assets. "This is not an easy task. People who launder money are extremely clever. They layer the transactions -- it goes from Sylhet to Keraniganj to Brahmanbaria. You have to track all that," he said.

"Twelve high-profile cases are already under investigation. It will take time. Look at Nigeria, it took 18 years. But at least we've started."

Salehuddin acknowledged that the current administration has not sought to reinvent the wheel but has retained elements of the macroeconomic framework left by the previous government.

He said it's not realistic to expect a dramatic break from the past with a "flashy, revolutionary budget that suddenly delivers massive new revenue".

"Some say we're just following in old footsteps -- there's some truth to that," he said. "But that doesn't mean there's no innovation. There are some bold steps in tax and expenditure. There are certain frameworks and methodologies in place, and those need to be carried forward successfully."

He added that the budget remains open for public feedback and that suggestions will be considered before final approval later this month. "We are asking for constructive collaboration, not just one-sided criticism."

BUDGET GEARED TOWARD STABILITY

Planning Adviser Wahiduddin Mahmud said the proposed budget aims to restore economic stability through pragmatism and fiscal discipline, mainly by curbing excessive public expenditure. "This budget follows austerity measures," he said at the media briefing. "We've already paid off our foreign loans. We did it without taking new ones."

He criticised the previous government for approving many projects based solely on political considerations without securing

adequate financing. "The interim government is now implementing projects approved by the previous administration, because budgeting is a continuous process," he said.

Of the 1,113 projects initiated by the previous government, the interim administration has approved only 20 to 30, and those were pre-listed by the former government, he said.

While the interim government has not taken on any new mega projects, it has prioritised the continuation of several important ones that are already underway. "We cannot abandon projects halfway through," he said, citing the Matarbari power plant, Bay Terminal, and Mongla Seaport as key priorities.

Energy Adviser Muhammad Fouzul Kabir Khan described the 2025-26 budget as "exceptional" in its focus on reducing excessive costs and curbing irregularities.

He expressed hope that inflation would ease soon, citing recent cuts in petroleum and LPG prices. "We're also increasing LNG imports to meet industrial demand."

Commerce Adviser Sk Bashir Uddin addressed previous warnings of possible food shortages. "The former prime minister warned there might be a famine, but that didn't happen because we took action to strengthen the supply of essential commodities."

Agriculture Adviser Lt Gen Md Jahangir Alam Chowdhury (retd) said that this year's boro season yielded 1.5 million tonnes of additional paddy. To support farmers, the government plans to build 100 small cold storage facilities to help them preserve their produce and sell during periods of market stress.

Finance Secretary Khairuzzaman Mozumder said the budget has been designed to avoid excessive reliance on bank borrowing.

The government also expanded coverage under social safety net programmes, he said, adding that the measures are expected to help ease inflationary pressure.

NBR Chairman Abdur Rahman Khan said tax rates on nearly all essential goods have been proposed for reduction. "This budget also aims to protect local industries."

For self-governing and state-owned institutions outside the revenue budget, the allowance must be financed from their own funds, the circular added.

Foreign ministry officials further said the allowance will not be applicable to members of the judiciary or the armed forces.

In the previous fiscal year,

the new allowance will not apply to employees on unpaid leave or those who surrendered their entire pension without restoration.

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In the proposed FY26 budget, the

government had announced an

additional five percent special

incentive, on top of the existing

annual five percent increment, for

government employees.

Yesterday's circular cancels that

order, meaning the actual annual

increases now stand at five percent

and 10 percent, respectively, for

certain contractual appointees.

Finance ministry officials estimate that implementing the allowance will require Tk 5,000-5,500 crore.

In July 2023, the previous

Govt revises definition of freedom fighter

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local collaborators -- Razakars, Al-Badr, Al-Shams, the then Muslim League, Jamaat-e-Islami, Nezame Islam, and the Peace Committee -- towards achieving Bangladesh's independence.

Those recognised as freedom fighters must be civilians who were of the minimum age as determined by the government during the time of war.

Also included as freedom fighters are members of the armed forces, East Pakistan Rifles (EPR), police, the Mujibnagar government and its recognised forces, naval commandos, Kilo Force, and Ansar members.

All women who were subjected to torture by the Pakistani forces and their collaborators (Birangans); and all doctors, nurses, and medical assistants who provided treatment to wounded freedom fighters in field hospitals during the war will continue to be regarded as freedom fighters.

MUKTILUDDHHER SHOHOJOGI (ASSOCIATE OF THE LIBERATION WAR)

The ordinance defines an "associate of the Liberation War" as follows: "Individuals who, between March 26 and December 16, 1971, resided either within the country or abroad and played a role in inspiring freedom fighters, organising support, accelerating the war effort, and contributing to the achievement of Bangladesh's independence through organisational leadership, global opinion building, securing diplomatic support, and strengthening psychological resolve."

These associates include the

Bangladeshi professionals who were abroad during the Liberation War and made significant contributions in favour of the war, and Bangladeshi citizens who actively engaged in shaping international public opinion.

The persons who served under the Mujibnagar government as officials, employees, diplomats, or who were appointed as doctors, nurses, or assistants by the government will also be considered associates.

All MNAs and MPAs affiliated with the Mujibnagar government who were later recognised as members of the Constituent Assembly will also fall under this category.

Besides, all artists and personnel of the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, and all Bangladeshi journalists who worked in support of the war both at home and abroad and members of the Swadhin Bangla football team will now be considered associates of the Liberation War.

They would previously be considered freedom fighters.

The ordinance defines a "freedom fighter's family" as: "The spouse, son, daughter, father, or mother of a recognised freedom fighter."

The family of a Liberation War associate is defined as: "The spouse, son, daughter, father, or mother of a recognised associate of the Liberation War."

The ordinance also makes a slight revision to the definition of the Liberation War itself. It now states:

"The Liberation War refers to the

armed struggle, conducted between March 26 and December 16, 1971, by the people of Bangladesh to establish a sovereign democratic state founded on equality, human dignity, and social justice, against the occupying and invading Pakistani armed forces and their collaborators -- Razakars, Al-Badr, Al-Shams, Jamaat-e-Islami, Nezame Islam, and the Peace Committee."

The new definition of Liberation War drops the name of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The previous one mentioned that the war was waged responding to Bangabandhu's call for independence.

Freedom fighter and Liberation War researcher Afsan Chowdhury said the move was entirely a bureaucratic decision.

"We have seen this since 1972 -- every time a new government comes to power, they create a new list of freedom fighters. There are personal benefits involved," he told the newspaper late last night.

"People will not accept this. The Liberation War will remain as it always has been -- in the hearts of the general people."

Talking to The Daily Star, valiant freedom fighter Fazlur Rahman, also an adviser to BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia, said, "They [the government] do not uphold the spirit of the Liberation War ... It does not matter to me what types of ordinances they issue. The Liberation War will forever remain in its rightful place."

Parties largely agree to let MPs vote

among themselves whether MPs should be allowed to vote independently on constitutional amendments, he said.

The NCP does not agree that lawmakers shouldn't be allowed to vote independently when the issue is about national security.

The party supports that opposition MPs would lead the four expenditure-related committees, said Sarjis, adding that his party proposed that the committees on home affairs, finance, planning, and public administration should also be chaired by the opposition.

On women's representation, Tasnim Jara, joint member secretary of the NCP, said 25 percent of the parliamentary seats must be allocated for women representatives.

Direct elections should be held in these seats to ensure female leadership, he said.

Jamaat Nayeb-e-Ameer Syed Abdulla Mohammad Taher said his party supports amending Article 70 of the constitution to allow MPs to vote independently on all matters except finance bills, votes of confidence, and constitutional changes.

He further mentioned that the BNP had informally indicated that it would agree on the three exceptions and might issue a note of dissent about the inclusion of broader national issues on which MPs could vote independently.

He expressed hopes that the National Charter would be finalised by July, emphasising the importance of reaching at least a minimum level of consensus among political parties.

Mongolia PM resigns after anti-corruption protests

AFP, Ulaanbaatar

Mongolian Prime Minister Luvsannamsrain Oyun-Erdene resigned yesterday following weeks of anti-corruption protests in the country's capital.

The landlocked democracy in northern Asia has battled deep seated corruption for decades, with many arguing that wealthy elites are hoarding the profits of a years-long coal mining boom at the expense of the general population.

Frustrations have flared since last month as public suspicions over the supposedly lavish lifestyles of the prime minister's family have fuelled persistent demonstrations in the capital Ulaanbaatar.

Oyun-Erdene announced his resignation yesterday after losing a confidence vote among lawmakers, according to a parliamentary statement.

Pakistan teen influencer killed after 'rejecting' man

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani police yesterday said a 17-year-old TikTok star was shot dead by a man who had repeatedly contacted her online.

Sana Yousaf, who turned 17 last week and had more than a million followers across her social media accounts, was killed at her home in the capital Islamabad on Monday evening.