



DURGA PUJA and Dhaka's shared past



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Once again, the majestic visitor of Sarat, or autumn, descends to her father's abode on her annual visit. This year, Goddess Durga is riding an elephant, which, according to traditional Hindu belief, is the regal and auspicious mode of transport that promises good times for her devotees.

Durga's mode of arrival and departure is always seen to carry



divine signals for the year ahead, and the news of the moment is that Earth will be lush with good crops, replenishing rains and prosperity for society's well-being.

This belief was shared by Tarock Nath Ghosh, a goldsmith by profession and a classical tabla player by passion. His ancestral home, beside the Lalbagh Fort and the old Durga

temple of Sri Sri Girigovardhan Jiu at Pushparaj Saha Lane, is said to have a history stretching back 300 years.

The geographical boundary and politics of culture have changed with time, but the ageing Tarock Nath Ghosh was quick to point out that Bengal has always maintained a peaceful synergy between people of different religions.

"Puja celebrations in Dhaka have evolved, but there was a time when there was no distinction between a Hindu devotee and a Muslim enthusiast," he recalled fondly. "It was a community festival where everyone took part, just as Hindus celebrated Shab-e-barat and Eid in Old Dhaka for ages."

Ghosh added, "There were many types of competitions held during the festivals of Hindus and Muslims in Old Dhaka. A spirited devotional dance during Durga Puja with traditional earthen incense burners, called Dhunuchi Naach, was performed by my Muslim friends. They invited themselves to luchi-

niramish and dhak-dholi events. Similarly, I used to partake in making handmade firecrackers called moura atoshbaji and eating halwa roti during Shab-e-barat."

It is a documented fact that the common people of Bengal have long shared cultural ties that extend beyond festivities. In the 19th and early 20th century, people dressed in dhoti-kurtas, and it was not until the height of colonial power that dress codes began to differ along religious lines.

Through the oral history of people like Tarock Nath Ghosh, we are reminded that celebrations such as Durga Puja are more than just customs; they are powerful tools for fostering harmony within the community.

Historically, they have brought people together, and as Goddess Durga descends to her mortal abode, she brings more than prosperity. She ushers in hope that people in these turbulent times will learn from the past — a time when communal harmony carried us beyond the boundaries of faith.

'People won't need to take to streets for due rights'

Jamaat ameer outlines three pledges if voted to power

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman yesterday said if his party comes to power, no one will have to stand on the streets to demand their due rights.

"Guided by justice, everyone will receive what they are rightfully owed," he said while addressing the annual session of the Forum of Diploma Engineers Bangladesh at the Institute of Diploma Engineers auditorium in the capital's Kakrail.

At the programme, the Jamaat chief outlined three fundamental commitments the party pledges to implement if voted to power — reforming the education system, eradicating bribery and corruption, and restructuring wages to reflect responsibilities across all sectors.

"First of all, we'll not keep this broken education system. We'll not promote the kind of education that breeds immorality, corruption, or degrades human values. Instead, we will offer the kind of education that teaches respect," he said.

Citing the need to align global education with lessons of morality, he added, "Once a boy or girl completes their education, they'll find work suited to their qualifications. Either they will become entrepreneurs, or they will secure a job in the service sector. No one will remain unemployed."

On the second commitment, Shafiqur said if Jamaat comes to power, it will eliminate bribery and corruption. He further promised to align wages with the nature of work across sectors.

Highlighting that police carry out their duties at great personal risk, the Jamaat ameer said, "If they are paid a beggar's wage, why would they take such risks? They must be treated with dignity. Because this isn't ensured, there is no peace in society today."



A peek into London lives of ousted AL leaders

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secretary of UK AL, and Habibur Rahman Habib, former MP for Sylhet-3.

All three, with longstanding ties to Britain and formal residency status, are active in party activities. Their involvement with UK AL is viewed as an effort to preserve political identity abroad despite facing corruption and criminal charges at home.

Other exiled figures have also surfaced at public events. Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury, the former state minister for shipping, and Abu Sayeed Al Mahmood Swapon, a former MP and parliament whip, have both been seen at community gatherings.

Abdur Rahman, the former fisheries and livestock minister and Presidium member of the AL, has appeared at rallies and demonstrations in East London.

SM Rezaul Karim, former fisheries and livestock minister, has become a visible presence in London, continuing his role as an active party leader.

Kabir Bin Anwar, who retired as cabinet secretary in early 2024 before joining the AL ranks, made his first public appearance in London earlier this year.

By contrast, some leaders remain out of the spotlight. Ranjit Chandra Sarkar, former MP for Sunamganj-1, and Kazi Abdul Wadud Dara, former state minister for rural development, rarely appear at public gatherings.

Saifuzzaman Chowdhury, the former land minister, has not been seen in public, though his property holdings in the UK have drawn scrutiny as part of corruption probes.

Hasan Mahmud, the former foreign minister now based in Brussels and reported to have secured UK residency rights, is wanted in Bangladesh for alleged crimes against humanity during the 2024 student-people uprising. He nevertheless attends select diaspora events linked to his party.

For some, the road to London was a story in itself. One former minister described his escape as something "fit for a Netflix thriller".

Speaking to The Daily Star, he recounted how, in the chaotic days after the collapse, he walked for days through the borderlands, eventually slipping into India under cover of darkness. There, he hid for several nights, relying on sympathetic contacts, before being moved discreetly through immigration patchwork that ultimately secured him safe passage to the United Kingdom.

"It was a story of fear, hunger, and uncertainty," he said, half boasting, half lamenting, "the kind of ordeal people would only believe if they saw it on screen."

The journey to Britain was not straightforward for others either. Immigration lawyers who spoke to The Daily Star said many of the politicians first crossed into India before making their way to the UK through a tangle of immigration channels.

A few had the privilege of long-term visas or indefinite leave to remain. Some reportedly never surrendered British citizenship obtained years earlier. Others arrived empty-handed and are now seeking asylum, telling officials that their lives would be in grave danger if they were forced back to

Bangladesh.

Their families, too, form part of the exodus. The wives and children of influential leaders have quietly arrived in Britain, some joining relatives who had been settled here for years. Others remain stranded at home, their journeys blocked by tighter immigration rules.

Beyond the politicians, a secondary wave of pro-AL lawyers, journalists, bureaucrats, and businessmen has also taken root in Britain since August 2024. Some face serious criminal charges back home, including corruption and even murder.

For those who managed to escape with families, London offers a veneer of normalcy: quiet evenings in



Exiled Awami League leaders in London recently gathered at Altab Ali Park after the UK AL president's passing. From left: Habibur Rahman Habib, Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury, Abdur Rahman, Shofiqur Rahman Chowdhury, SM Rezaul Karim, Abu Sayeed Al Mahmood Swapon, Kazi Abdul Wadud Dara, Anwaruzzaman Chowdhury.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

community restaurants, weekends at private parties, and the semblance of a routine that masks the uncertainty beneath.

For those who arrived alone, isolation gnaws at them, though they are often seen in online talk shows and virtual strategy sessions with comrades scattered across Bangladesh, India, and other diaspora strongholds. At political meetings in London halls, they speak with defiance, insisting that exile is a temporary setback.

In private, the cracks are visible. One former minister admitted to this correspondent that acknowledging mistakes made in July 2024 would be political suicide.

"If we say we were wrong, the ground beneath our feet disappears," he said, his voice heavy with bitterness.

Another, more buoyant, spoke with optimism. "By December, something will happen," he insisted, "and Awami League will once again have space to breathe."

Much of their confidence rests not only on internal party calculations but also on geopolitical factors. Several of the exiles hinted that India, unsettled by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus at the helm of the interim administration, may yet flex its muscles through trade barriers to tilt the balance.

But beneath the defiance lies a question that refuses to go away: how are they surviving? London is one of the most expensive cities in the world,

and many of these figures lack the right to work or access public funds. Yet they reside in comfortable homes and appear untroubled by financial hardship.

Party loyalists claim the leaders had anticipated this moment for years, quietly investing in properties under trusted names, moving funds across borders, and leaning on loyal associates within the diaspora to safeguard their wealth.

Critics see these maneuvers as nothing more than money laundering, yet one fact remains undeniable: exile has done little to strip them of their comforts or influence.

Almost every one of the party leaders who fled, many facing serious

Commission readies multiple options for govt

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It noted that there had been discussions on proposals from political parties, which included forming a Constituent Assembly, issuing a Constitutional Order, seeking the Supreme Court's opinion, and holding a referendum.

Commission member Badiul Alam Majumdar also told The Daily Star yesterday that the body is currently weighing four broad options: a Constitutional Order, a referendum, opinion from the Supreme Court, and a Constituent or Constitutional Reform Assembly.

"Talks will be held with political parties on this matter," he said. The next round of talks with parties is set to begin on October 5.

Several sources at the meeting with experts indicated that if a referendum is approved, it could be held on the same day as the general election planned for February next year.

In the case of a Constituent Assembly or Constitutional Reform Assembly, elections for the assembly and the national parliament could be held together.

The assembly would then carry out its reform mandate alongside regular legislative functions, while the president would issue any necessary Constitutional Order.

Experts who joined Friday's meeting included Justice MA Matin, a retired judge of the Appellate Division; Justice Moinul Islam

Chowdhury, a retired judge of the High Court; Mohammad Ikramul Haque, dean of Dhaka University's law faculty; and lawyers Sharif Bhuiyan, Tanim Hossain Shawon, and Imran Siddique. Commission participants included its Vice-President Prof Ali Riaz, and members Badiul Alam Majumdar, Justice Md Emdadul Haque, Iftekharuzzaman, and Md Aiyub Mia.

Political parties have been grappling to reach a consensus on how to implement the July Charter reform proposals tied to the constitution. Many of the 84 proposals are constitutional matters.

Earlier rounds of consensus commission dialogue stalled, with the September 17 session ending fruitlessly for a third consecutive day.

To break the impasse, the commission floated the idea of issuing a Constitutional Order and holding a referendum alongside the next general election.

The BNP rejected the proposal, warning it could create "constitutional disorder" and set a "bad precedent."

The Jamaat-e-Islami, in contrast, supported the move but demanded the referendum take place before election day.

The National Citizen Party remained undecided, pending consultations with legal experts.

Political parties and experts had earlier floated a range of

options: a referendum; a Special or Provisional Constitutional Order by the president; enactment through the next parliament or a constituent assembly; designating parliament itself as a reform assembly; or seeking the Supreme Court's advice.

Party positions varied. BNP proposed that all parties commit to the charter in their manifestos, with the winner responsible for reforms within two years.

Jamaat called for a "Provisional Constitutional Order" effective from August 5, 2024, placing the charter above all existing laws.

The NCP and AB Party demanded a constituent assembly, while Islamic Andolan Bangladesh suggested a presidential proclamation.

Ganosamhati Andolan sought a "Constitutional Reform Council", with implementation within six months of the next government and full execution in a year. Rastrosongskar Andolon proposed electing a "Constitution Reform Convention/Assembly" alongside parliamentary polls.

Several parties, including AB Party, Khelafat Majlish, Zaker Party and Gono Odhikar Parishad, supported a referendum, while the Samajtantrik Dal (Marxist) favoured one only if broad consensus was reached. The Communist Party of Bangladesh, Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal, and Gonoforum insisted reforms should be left to the next parliament.

Revive, reform NHRC to protect human rights

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"National security cannot be ensured without guaranteeing people's rights," Iftekharuzzaman said, suggesting that the NHRC be empowered to visit and inspect institutions such as the army and intelligence agencies whenever rights violations are reported.

"The NHRC and similar other commissions have turned into a 'rehabilitation centre' for retired bureaucrats," he added, stressing the need for clear eligibility criteria for appointing the chairperson and members.

Iftekharuzzaman, who also heads the Anti-Corruption Commission Reform Commission, said aspirations for reform will not succeed without institutional change.

He said the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence, National Security Intelligence, Detective Branch of police, and National Telecommunication Monitoring Centre were instrumental in creating "a surveillance-based society through consistent human rights violations".

"People once kept their phones away at public events, fearing surveillance, but now they have developed 'a fake confidence' that they are no longer being watched.

"But I can guarantee you these are all being recorded and will be made public when necessary. They [these institutions] have that capacity."

He said several recommendations, both national and international — including from the United Nations — have clearly called for reforms to these institutions and the abolition of the Rapid Action Battalion. "Why is the interim government not announcing its position on the matter or taking any action?"

Noted economist Debapriya Bhattacharya, convener of the Citizen's Platform for SDGs and moderator of the dialogue, said past experience shows the NHRC chair must not only be honest and virtuous but also courageous enough to stand up to the powerful.

"The commission in the past had neither claws nor teeth. As a result, it could not bite. We don't want such a commission again," he said, adding that the public does not want "a good individual but without backbone" to lead the NHRC.

Supreme Court lawyer Barrister Jyotirmoy Barua said appointing former bureaucrats to the NHRC had created a "conflict of interest" in the past and urged that the new ordinance include a clause disqualifying them.

Barrister Sara Hossain, honorary executive director of Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, said previous commissions had some achievements but ignored serious issues such as enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings.

She said a new commission has become necessary amid rising rights

violations, with "mob violence" now frequent.

Shaheen Anam, executive director of Manusher Jonno Foundation, said hundreds of people have been jailed without bail while extortion remains rampant. "Yet there is silence on these issues in the absence of the commission."

She added that the NHRC cannot function effectively if the government itself gets involved in serious rights violations.

Eminent jurist Shahdeen Malik called for lowering public expectations of the NHRC, saying such commissions worldwide are rarely empowered to investigate serious rights violations and mostly function as an "advisory body" to the government.

Justice Moinul Islam Chowdhury, head of the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, said the NHRC will administer the Enforced Disappearance Prevention and Redress Ordinance-2025, a draft of which was approved by the interim government in August.

Meanwhile, Shireen Huq, head of the Women's Affairs Reform Commission, said activating the long-dormant office of the ombudsperson — absent for 54 years since independence — would help address many rights complaints and free up the NHRC to focus on violations committed by the state.