



PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS

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The vibrant pulse of Dhaka city beats to many rhythms, and among them is the perpetual debate over where to buy the day's groceries. For millions, this isn't just a transactional decision; it's a reflection of lifestyle, values, and the ever-evolving urban experience. A traditional "kacha bazar" is loud and busy, while a modern supermarket has bright, clean aisles. Each one offers a

perfectly: "When I shop at the kacha bazar, I know the fish and meat are truly fresh, brought in the same day. There is a transparency you don't always find elsewhere; no worries about items being frozen and sold days later." This assurance of direct-from-source produce resonates deeply, particularly when it comes to highly perishable goods. Beyond freshness, the wet market offers a dynamic pricing experience. The opportunity to haggle



different experience for the shopper.
THE ALLURE OF AUTHENTICITY
For many seasoned shoppers, the traditional wet market remains unrivalled, primarily for its promise of unparalleled freshness. Habibul Alam, a father of two, deeply rooted in the city's ways, articulates this sentiment

and secure a better deal, particularly in the evening when vendors are keen to clear their stock, is a cherished aspect for many. One shopper observes, "Super shops have fixed prices." Here, there is a dance, a negotiation that can sometimes get you a much better price, especially for vegetables." This direct interaction with vendors also fosters a



sense of community and connection, which often goes missing in more formalised retail environments.
THE CALL OF CONVENIENCE
Conversely, the rapid pace of life in Dhaka has propelled many towards the undeniable convenience of supermarkets. For a young, working professional navigating a demanding

schedule, the appeal is clear. Mithila Rahman, a private banker, notes, "Supermarkets are simply more practical for my lifestyle. They are often closer to home, and I can quickly grab what I need without spending too much time. I can purchase in any quantity without having to have a lengthy conversation because everything is priced clearly." The often chaotic and sensory-rich environment of a wet market, with its distinct smells and crowded pathways, can be a deterrent for those seeking a more streamlined and comfortable shopping experience, especially during Dhaka's often challenging climate. The ease of navigating well organised aisles, often air-conditioned, provides a stark contrast to the bustling, open-air markets, offering a quick and efficient solution for daily necessities.

BLENDING BOTH WORLDS
A growing segment of Dhaka's population effortlessly navigates both shopping realms, leveraging the unique benefits of each. A university lecturer exemplifies this hybrid approach, explaining, "Sometimes, when I want a relaxed shopping trip, perhaps to pick up some imported items or specific gourmet ingredients for guests, I take my kids to a nearby super shop." It is

a pleasant outing." These trips are often about more than just groceries; they are leisure activities. However, for a truly authentic culinary experience, the wet market beckons. "But when I'm looking for a specific seasonal fish, or perhaps various local vegetables that are harder to find in supermarkets, the local wet market is my go-to," he adds. This selective approach highlights that for many, the choice is not mutually exclusive but rather complementary, dictated by specific needs, desired experiences, and the type of items being sought. As various Bangladeshi newspaper articles have pointed out, the rise of both formats indicates a diverse consumer base with evolving preferences, where traditional markets continue to thrive alongside modern retail chains.

THE EVOLVING LANDSCAPE
The ongoing interplay between wet markets and supermarkets underscores the dynamic nature of Dhaka's consumer landscape. While concerns about supply chains and freshness persist for some regarding supermarkets, their growth reflects a demand for convenience, hygiene, and a wider array of products, including imported goods. Conversely, wet markets, despite challenges like infrastructure and hygiene, continue to be central to daily life, offering not just fresh produce but also a cultural experience and a crucial livelihood for countless vendors. As the city grows and consumer habits shift, both retail models are constantly adapting, ensuring that Dhaka's residents have a plethora of choices in their daily quest for sustenance.

THE REINVENTION OF SHWAPNO

From Retail Underdog to Market Leader

“If it only serves the elite, it will never scale. We decided to build a brand that belongs to the middle-class family, to the teacher, the banker, the homemaker, and that shift in mindset changed everything.”
Sabbir Nasir
Managing Director, Shwapno

A decade ago, few would have bet on Shwapno's survival, let alone its dominance. Between 2010 and 2013, the Bangladesh grocery chain operated only 37 to 38 outlets and struggled to stay afloat. Today, with more than 750 stores nationwide, Shwapno stands as the country's largest grocery retailer and one of its most remarkable turnaround stories. Once mired in heavy losses and internal doubts, the company has posted positive EBITDA for eight consecutive years.
The transformation is inseparable from Managing Director Sabbir Nasir, who took charge in 2012 amid widespread scepticism. "Vendors had lost trust, employees were demoralised, and even the parent company considered closing it," he recalls. "But I believed modern retail could serve everyday Bangladeshi households."
REIMAGINING MODERN RETAIL
At the time, supermarkets in Bangladesh were viewed as playgrounds for the affluent. Shwapno's stores, dimly lit and poorly stocked, did little to change that perception. Nasir's challenge was not just to fix operations but to reimagine the very idea of what a supermarket could be.
"We asked ourselves: who is modern retail for?" says Nasir. "If it only serves the elite, it will never scale. We decided to build a brand that belongs to the middle-class family, to the teacher, the banker, the homemaker, and that shift in mindset



changed everything."
From that decision came a transformation built on four pillars: value for money, convenience, trust, and bond. The goal was to make modern retail accessible, fair, and emotionally resonant.
THE LOOP OF CONFIDENCE
Shwapno's turnaround began with what Nasir calls the "loop of confidence," a virtuous cycle linking employees, customers, suppliers, and investors. "We realised that if we could win back the customer's confidence first, everything else would follow," he explains. "Satisfied customers bring more sales; that restores investor faith, re-engages suppliers, and reignites employee pride. It's a simple loop, but once it starts moving, it feeds itself."
The company began investing in retail training, from housekeeping to category planning, disciplines long neglected in Bangladesh's grocery sector. Headquarters adopted strategic merchandising frameworks, while field teams learned to connect daily execution with the brand's long-term purpose. Over time, these efforts evolved into what employees now call the "Value Tree," a symbolic guide to Shwapno's culture, rooted in consumer centricity and nourished by pragmatism.
THE SCIENCE OF EVERYDAY RELEVANCE
By 2012, Shwapno's leadership understood a crucial insight about the

Bangladeshi middle class: time and proximity mattered more than price alone. Shwapno leaned into this truth, pioneering hyper-local expansion strategies while building digital systems to support them.
Behind the scenes, its SAP backbone was reinforced by proprietary software linking SKU-level sales data with neighbourhood demographics. "We didn't want to rely on instinct anymore," says Nasir. "We wanted to make retail scientific to predict demand, not just react to it."
This combination of technology and touch, data-driven precision blended with personal service, became a hallmark of Shwapno's operating philosophy.
INNOVATION BEYOND THE AISLES
In its early years, Shwapno broke class barriers with bold, price-focused campaigns and live fish aquariums that blended wet-market familiarity with modern retail. As profits rose, it expanded into sustainability and inclusion, becoming South and Southeast Asia's first retailer to adopt GLOBAL.G.A.P. standards and earning HACCP certification for food safety. Shwapno also championed diversity by hiring people with disabilities, third-gender individuals, and rural entrepreneurs. "Profit alone doesn't define progress," says Nasir. "Real innovation creates fairness and inclusion."
FRANCHISE MODEL INNOVATION AND SHARED GROWTH
Perhaps the boldest step in Shwapno's

transformation was its franchise model innovation. Instead of pursuing a conventional franchise system, Shwapno introduced a pseudo-equity partnership model—a reimagined approach that invited small local investors to fund store spaces while the company handled operations, branding, and supply chain management. Profits were shared at the gross margin level, ensuring that incentives remained aligned and expansion could accelerate without relying heavily on debt.
"We wanted others to share in the growth," Nasir explains. "Not just as franchisees, but as genuine partners with real skin in the game."
CONFIDENCE AS CAPITAL
Shwapno's rise was not just about numbers but narrative, a belief that confidence, not capital, is the foundation of transformation. The company blended efficiency with empathy, technology with trust, and purpose with pragmatism.
"Bangladesh's retail revolution didn't start with technology or money," Nasir reflects. "It started with a belief that our people, our farmers, and our customers deserved better. Once that confidence took root, everything else followed."
From an underdog clinging to survival to a market leader redefining modern retail, Shwapno's journey offers a simple but profound lesson: in business, as in life, transformation begins not with perfection but with purpose.