



Dhaka's enduring love affair with TRADE FAIR

RBR

Why is Dhaka obsessed with trade fairs, export fairs or duty-free shopping? I am yet to find an answer to our everlasting euphoria for these fairs.

My family's annual ritual was to go to the trade fair with a gang of aunts, uncles and cousins at the Sher-e-Bangla fairgrounds. We would stand in line, brave the January chill, risk a dust attack, and be in awe of the lights and the humongous entry gate. We never missed a trade fair.

I proudly own my mother's blue porcelain tea set from People's Ceramic, bought at one such fair. A nostalgic antique now, their dinnerware sets, one in blue and one in red, both in the same maple leaf design, were a big hit, and almost every family in Dhaka



seemed to own them. I remember that in the 70s they even had circuses at the fairgrounds. Watching a motorbike spin round in a circular cage, and acrobats on a trapeze, was pure thrill.

If you go back to the mid-seventies,



PHOTO: STAR

the Dacca Trade Fair marked the beginning of organised trade promotion in independent Bangladesh, preceding the formal Dhaka International Trade Fair (DITF) that began later in 1995.

Trade fairs are close to the heart of Dhaka people. Every year we go there ritualistically, to eat kebabs and buy things we need, or pretend to need.

As you enter the gate, the first stall you see is Kiam Metal Industries Ltd. It is my all-time favourite because its base is in Kushtia, my hometown, and because it is the largest kitchenware manufacturer in Bangladesh.

I will always go to Kiam. This time, I found my dream tea-brewing pot. I had always been on the lookout for a pot or

kettle where I could brew the perfect cup of tea. I wanted it to look like a mug with a lid and a sturdy handle. I tried many versions of that idea but never found the right one, until I visited the Kiam stall this year.

For obvious reasons, there was a rush, as everyone went for the different sizes of non-stick pots and pans. This year, honeycomb non-stick fry pans in contemporary designs that reduce oil consumption and suit Asian-style cooking were much in demand. Along with induction cookers, kitchenware from Kiam was selling like hotcakes.

If you do not buy a tin of assorted biscuits from Nabisco Biscuit & Bread Factory Ltd, then your visit to the trade

fair remains incomplete. It has been an annual tradition in my family to visit the Nabisco stall and buy a big tin of cookies and lozenges. The biscuit-baking scent of this local factory is the smell of Dhaka. I got some pineapple cream biscuits, and they tasted just as they used to, bringing back so many childhood memories. Their trademark glucose biscuits in the shocking pink wrapper were what school tiffin meant.

I was thrilled to see a grand stall of Savoy Ice Cream selling their bestsellers, Discone, cakes and mango sticks, with many special offers. Local snacks and drinks were also getting their share of limelight at the fair.

RFL Plastics, with its wide range of premium-quality products, kitchenware, cleaning items, food containers, baby ware and plastic furniture, had an excellent product line. When you enter their stall, you feel like yes, I think I need this, I think I need that, and you end up filling your basket with cute but unnecessary stuff.

Pakistani, Indian, Turkish and Iranian stores drew large crowds, but if you look beyond that international meena bazar, you will see thriving local businesses and industries: Bangladeshi tea, handicrafts and food.

So yeah, that's the 2026 trade fair in a nutshell. And I haven't even written about the food court and play zones. The fair has donned a new look in its new venue at Purbachal. Some old-timers feel lost, some like the organised buzz, and die-hard fans just love it all, from 1974 till today.

Zia's 90th birth anniversary today

UNB, Dhaka

The BNP is set to observe the 90th birth anniversary of its founder and former president of Bangladesh Ziaur Rahman today with due solemnity.

Born on January 19, 1936, in Bogura's Baghari, Ziaur Rahman was assassinated by a group of army officers at the Chittagong Circuit House on May 30, 1981.

He founded the Bangladesh Nationalist Party in 1978 and later became the country's seventh president.

The BNP on Saturday announced a two-day programme to mark Zia's birth anniversary.

As part of the programme, party flags will be hoisted at all BNP offices across the country, including its central office in the capital's Nayapaltan, this morning.

Party leaders and activists, led by standing committee members, will place wreaths at Zia's grave at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar and offer fateha at 11:00am.

The Doctors' Association of Bangladesh will organise a free medical camp as part of the programme.

The BNP will also hold a discussion in memory of Zia at the Institution of Diploma Engineers, Bangladesh, on Tuesday.

The party's associate bodies will also mark the day with various programmes, including discussions and the distribution of warm clothes. City, district and upazila units will observe the occasion with similar programmes.

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir issued a message paying tribute to Ziaur Rahman. "Shaheed Zia was a visionary statesman. The proclaimer of Bangladesh's independence, the pioneer of multi-party democracy, the commander of the Z-Force during the Liberation War, and the proponent of Bangladesh nationalist ideology – I pay tribute to him on the occasion of his 90th birth anniversary."

He recalled Zia's contributions to the Liberation War, national development and the restoration of multi-party democracy.

The BNP leader also prayed for the eternal peace of the departed soul of Zia.



421 aspirants back in race

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Mohammad Nurul Amin from the same constituency appealed to the EC, seeking cancellation of Sarwar's candidacy.

In Feni-3, BNP candidate Abdul Awal Mintoo regained his candidature after Jamaat candidate Mohammad Fakhruddin filed an appeal against the validation of his nomination.

In Tangail-4, Abdul Latif Siddique, a four-time lawmaker and a former Awami League leader, regained his candidature. His nomination was challenged by Jatiya Party leader Md Liakat Ali.

In Cumilla-10, BNP candidate Abdul Gafur Bhuiyan lost his candidature after his nomination was challenged by Bangladesh Shangkritik Muktijote candidate Kazi Nur E. Alam Siddique.

The EC cancelled the candidacy of BNP aspirant for Brahmanbari-1 Syed AK Ekramuzzana after he was found to be a fugitive, following an appeal by a rival candidate.

Jamaat candidate from Cox's Bazar-2 AHM Hamidur Rahman Azad regained his nomination after it was cancelled during scrutiny. The EC also cleared Tasnim Jara, an independent candidate for Dhaka-9.

Jara, who recently resigned from the National Citizen Party, was rejected by the RO due to a mismatch in the signatures from one percent of voters during scrutiny.

The EC also reinstated the candidacy of July uprising frontliner and NCP leader Hasnat Abdullah for Cumilla-4.

Hasnat objected to the candidacy of BNP nominee Manjurul Ahsan Munshi in the same constituency. Following Hasnat's appeal, the EC cancelled Munshi's candidacy, citing allegations that he was a loan defaulter and had concealed the information.

Munshi filed a counter-appeal against Hasnat's nomination, claiming his affidavit lacked income and expenditure details. The EC, however, rejected Munshi's appeal and upheld Hasnat's candidacy.

The EC also upheld the candidacy of BNP-nominated Sabira Sultana in Jashore-2.

In Pirojpur-1, Jamaat candidate Masud Saidi filed an appeal against BNP candidate Alamgir Hossain. The EC rejected it.

The EC also rejected the appeal of BNP-nominated candidate TS Ayub from Jashore-4 over allegations of loan default. However, it approved the nomination of his son, Farhad Sajid, who is independently contesting from the same constituency.

In Dhaka-2, Jamaat candidate Md Abdul Haque also regained his candidacy after the EC accepted his appeal.

The commission declared the nomination of Chattogram-9 Jamaat candidate AKM Fazlul Haque invalid

over dual citizenship issues, as he had US citizenship.

The EC did not reinstate the candidature of Jatiya Party faction leader Anisul Islam Mamhud.

The EC declared valid the nomination of AHM Kaium (Hasnat Kaium), an independent candidate from Kishorganj-5 (Nikli Bajitpur), despite his application lacking at least one percent voters' signatures.

Others who regained their candidacies include Gono Forum General Secretary Mizanur Rahman (Magura-1) and three Jamaat candidates: Md Abdul Momin (Chandpur-2), Md Mosleh Uddin Farid (Jashore-2), and Md Mujibur Rahman Azadi (Jamalpur-3).

Of the 2,568 nomination papers submitted, returning officers initially accepted 1,842 and rejected 723 after scrutiny.

According to the parliamentary election schedule, candidates have time to withdraw their nominations until tomorrow after the appeal hearings. After that, the final number of candidates contesting in the election will be determined.

Ahead of the 2024 polls, around half of 560 aspirants, who appealed against nomination cancellations by returning officers, were successful in regaining their candidacies. In contrast, only 39 percent of 543 appellants were successful in the 2018 polls.

BNP raises alarm over EC 'bias'

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"We urged the authorities to take urgent measures in this regard," he told reporters after the meeting.

He also said returning officers, assistant returning officers, police superintendents, and other officials in some constituencies were working in favour of one party.

"We have brought these matters to the commission's attention and urged their withdrawal after investigation, in the interest of a free, fair, and acceptable election."

"The Election Commission is engaging in questionable conduct on several issues, with the postal ballots for expatriate Bangladeshis being the most prominent and unresolved one."

Fakhrul added that his party has already submitted complaints to the EC in this regard, adding that ballots sent to registered expatriate voters and the printing of the papers remain "problematic".

"We believe these ballots are not correct. There was some bias here, and there were attempts to give undue advantage to a particular party. We've urged the Election Commission to fix this."

He added that the BNP has demanded postal ballots inside the country be distributed only after

electoral symbols are allocated. These postal ballots, he said, must be arranged in the same manner as regular ballots that are used on polling day.

Fakhrul further alleged that Jamaat-e-Islami activists are violating the electoral code of conduct by collecting NID copies, bKash and mobile numbers from households. "This breaches personal privacy and is a criminal offense. We have already submitted objections over this violation and urged urgent action."

Emphasising his party's commitment to a level playing field for the 13th parliamentary election scheduled for February 12, he said their Chairperson Tarique Rahman had even cancelled personal trips to uphold fairness.

"But leaders of many parties, including key figures, are repeatedly conducting campaigns, violating the code of conduct."

He added, "Another issue we consider extremely important is that, in various constituencies of Dhaka city, a party has resorted to unethical tactics to ensure victory for its nominated candidates by transferring large numbers of voters from different parts of the country

into Dhaka constituencies."

Fakhrul said the BNP has urgently requested details of voter transfers to Dhaka, including how many were moved, from which areas to which constituencies, when they were moved and the reasons behind the transfers.

"We have also received complaints that several senior EC officials are working for a particular party. We've requested that measures be taken against them."

About whether a fair election is possible under this EC, he said, "We've always believed it is possible, provided the problems are resolved and the issues we raised are addressed."

On whether the BNP believes a level playing field exists, he said, "We think it does, though there are minor flaws. We believe those can be fixed."

Asked about nomination hearings inside the EC and simultaneous protests by the BNP's student wing outside, Fakhrul said, "The student movement is theirs to explain. But we learned that a university election was halted, and the EC later allowed it again. We believe this was wrong. The EC should reconsider the decision; otherwise, it will be questionable."

Approval for 252 agencies raises red flags

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panel that prepared the White Paper.

"I am surprised that instead of cleaning up the mess, the authorities have raised the number of agencies," he told The Daily Star.

The government must take responsibility for the approvals, which will likely clutter the system. This is a real concern, he added.

According to the White Paper, Bangladeshi workers pay the highest migration cost in South Asia. Over the past decade, 19 percent of workers, who paid agents in advance, failed to migrate, resulting in a financial loss of around Tk 31,660 crore each year.

Despite repeated attempts, this correspondent could not reach Adviser Asif over his mobile phone. He also did not respond to text messages.

When contacted, Niamat Ullah Bhuiyan, senior secretary at the expatriates' welfare ministry, said that having more agencies reduces the possibility of manipulation by syndicates. "If each agency sends even one worker, the total number of migrant workers will increase significantly. Having a large number of agencies won't create any problem as long as they maintain ethical standards."

Referring to violations of rules by recruitment agencies, he said legal measures are in place to control them. Harsh punishment is meted out to dishonest agencies, and no one is given any special favour.

Over the years, complaints of fraud and manipulation against recruiting agencies have remained high.

Data from the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) shows that 2,213 complaints were filed in 2024; 2,380 in 2023; 1,240 in 2022; 582 in 2021; and 905 in 2020.

The number of recruiting agencies has seen a steady rise since 2009, when it hovered around 900. The figure stood at about 2,300 before the ouster of the Awami League government in August 2024.

The list of the newly approved agencies was published by the expatriates welfare and overseas employment ministry on

November 4 last year.

Bangladesh now has the highest number of recruitment agencies in South Asia, compared to 1,988 in India; 2,537 in Pakistan; 1,041 in Nepal; 857 in Sri Lanka; and 31 in Bhutan.

Fakhrul Islam, former joint secretary of Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA), said the approval of new recruiting agencies has both positive and negative sides to it.

The move is positive in the sense that it will allow new firms to operate in compliance with government regulations, he said.

Fakhrul, however, warned that the outlook for the current labour market situation is weak.

BANGLADESH'S MANPOWER EXPORT OVER THE YEARS

YEAR	MIGRANT WORKERS
2025	11,31,113
2024	10,11,969
2023	13,05,453
2022	11,35,873
2021	6,17,000

"The new agencies, which have to bear high monthly expenses, may not survive unless new labour markets open. The sector could face a serious crisis if that does not happen," he said.

Shariful Hasan, associate director of the BRAC Migration Programme, said that issuing more licences will not help reduce migration costs or the suffering of migrants.

"I don't think the 252 new licences will improve the migration system or ease hardships of migrant workers... What matters is transparency, accountability, and proper management," he told this newspaper.

'Some DCs, SPs acting partially'

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Rafiqul Islam Khan was also present at the meeting.

Briefing journalists after the meeting, Taher said, "We have prepared a list of those [DCs and SPs]. We will continue to observe. We have verbally informed the Election Commission by identifying such individuals. We have not submitted anything in writing. We conveyed the matter to the chief adviser today."

"If the Election Commission does not take appropriate steps, the chief adviser should intervene. Because we firmly believe the chief adviser personally wants a free and fair election."

Taher also said some advisers around the chief adviser are trying to mislead him. "We have drawn his attention to that."

He further said the party raised another issue with the chief adviser.

Taher claimed the government has gone "overboard" regarding the chief of a particular party by providing "excessive" security and extra protocol, saying that it

clearly violated the principle of equality on the electoral field.

"We've said we have no objection if anyone is given enhanced security or protocol. But as one of the major parties, the ameer of Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami must also be treated equally. If this does not happen, the nation will hold the Election Commission responsible for biased conduct, and the level playing field will be destroyed."

Taher also questioned the role of the Election Commission in scrutinising nomination papers. "We are already seeing some discrepancies. That is why we drew the chief adviser's attention today so that this can be remedied."

"We are hearing that attempts are being made by a particular party to exert pressure on the Election Commission so that nominations which should be cancelled due to these faults are not cancelled."

If such conduct continues, he warned, "doubts and despair" may grow among the people regarding the prospect of a

fair election.

Taher said, "You know BNP activists are going door to door distributing so-called family cards and farmer cards to voters. These have no legal authority whatsoever. This is a clear act of deception. Even before the election, they are resorting to such tricks to mislead people. So it is obvious what will happen if they win the election."

"Today we told the chief adviser that this is illegal. We have also been telling the chief election commissioner that steps must be taken to stop this, as it will spark clashes in different areas."

When his attention was drawn to BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir's allegation that Jamaat leaders and activists are going door to door collecting bKash numbers, Taher said, "Did Fakhrul bhai accompany us to see whether we are collecting bKash numbers? Since we are raising the issue of their so-called family cards, they also feel the need to say something. That is why he made this comment."