

## Sharsha: waiting for the border to breathe again

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Trade has slowed, travel has shrunk, and uncertainty hangs heavy over border communities. In places like Sharsha, where livelihoods are tightly bound to cross-border movement, diplomacy is not an abstract concept. It is real-life encounters.

Kashipur, a frontier village in Sharsha upazila, lies about an hour's drive from Jashore town. By the time I reached its bazar around midday, the place felt subdued, reflecting its remoteness and unease. At a tin shed tea stall beside a three-wheeler stand, I sat with a shopkeeper, a farmer, a tempo driver and a meat seller, men whose fortunes rise and fall with the border to a large extent.

"What happens at the border affects us in ways people in Dhaka don't understand," said Anisur Rahman, 55, a lifelong resident. He spoke wistfully of a childhood when crossing into Indian villages like Boyra and Kulanandapur was casual, almost instinctive. "We moved freely then. No fear," he said.

That freedom has steadily disappeared, especially after India erected the border fence roughly 25 years ago. Today, even approaching the border pillars feels dangerous. "Farmers are afraid of being shot by the BSF," Anisur said. "Now it is unthinkable to go close."

While villagers in Kashipur may not follow geopolitics, they feel its consequences acutely. Trade, both formal and informal, has slowed, and prices have climbed. Tariqul Islam, a tempo driver, said a tyre that cost Tk 3,200 a year ago now sells for Tk 5,500. Fertiliser prices have risen from around Tk 1,200 to Tk 1,800 a sack.

"This is largely linked to India," he said simply.

Yet views in Kashipur are not uniform. Karimul Sheikh, a farmer and local BNP leader who joined the conversation, was surprisingly unfazed by the strained relationship.

"Let relations be bad for a while," he said with a shrug. "It's better if rice and onions stop coming from India."

His reasoning was bluntly economic. Imported rice, he argued, depresses prices for local farmers. Onion imports, too, have long distorted the market.

"Whenever prices rose, India stopped exports, and prices would skyrocket," he said. "We once bought onions at Tk 200 a kilo. Now, even without imports, you can buy them at Tk 50. Farmers here have started growing onions themselves."

"India doesn't want us anyway," Karimul added. "If one side doesn't

want a relationship, what can the other do?"

Asked what he expects from the next government, his answer was modest.

"We want to live in peace," he said. "No government can fulfil everyone's demands. Not even families can."

But one demand was non-negotiable: the vote.

"We couldn't vote for 17 years," he said. "This time we will."

Nowhere is the diplomatic chill more visible than at Benapole, Bangladesh's largest land port and busiest crossing with India. In normal times, thousands of people cross here daily. When I reached around 3:00pm, the area outside the immigration and customs buildings felt eerily empty.

Porters in red shirts sat idle on the



pavement. Md Shajahan, one of them, said his earnings have collapsed over the past few months.

"India isn't issuing visas," he said. "Hardly 500 people cross now. Before, it was thousands every day."

Nearby, Md Rafiqul Islam, who runs Shantu Enterprise, a clearing and forwarding agency next to the immigration office, described the downturn in stark numbers.

"Earlier, 1,200 to 1,400 trucks entered from India every day," he said. "Now it's barely 200 to 250."

The collapse began around eight months ago and has only worsened. With visas suspended, importers cannot even travel to India to negotiate deals.

"Look around," Rafiqul said, gesturing at the empty compound. "There used to be crowds here from morning till night."

Bus services have suffered the same fate. Where dozens of coaches

once ran daily between Benapole and Dhaka, only five or six now operate on a good day.

For Rafiqul, the solution is unmistakably political.

"Nothing will improve without an election," he said. "Whoever wins, an elected government is the only way out."

That sentiment was echoed by Nazrul Islam, a businessman in Benapole, though with sharper language.

"We want a Bangladesh where India does not interfere or intimidate," he said. "We in border areas may endure hardship, but we don't want India frowning at us anymore."

Yet the cost of prolonged tension is undeniable. Transport companies, clearing agents, hotels, restaurants and car rental services across

## ANFREL deploys 22 teams for polls monitoring

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ANFREL said its methodology is based on internationally recognised principles of election observation and builds on a pre-election assessment mission conducted in Bangladesh in November-December 2025.

ANFREL's observers will take part in a two-day briefing workshop in Dhaka on February 6-7.

The mission will issue an interim report with preliminary findings and immediate recommendations on February 15, accompanied by a press briefing in Dhaka, and publish a comprehensive final report after the mission concludes.

## Leadership change without change in policy futile

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At the Kalihati rally, presided over by Muhammad Ali Amzad Hossain, the party's candidate for Tangail-4, Rezaul Karim urged people to stand by Islami Andolan in its movement.

"There is no alternative to electing honest, just and principle-based leadership. A single vote in favour of Islam means taking one step forward towards building a justice-based state. With every additional vote for the hand fan symbol, the strength of Islam will increase," he said.

At a rally in Delduar, Akhinur Mia, the IAB candidate for Tangail-6, said, "If I am elected MP, the long-cherished dreams of this region will be fulfilled. In Sha Allah [God willing]. I will not engage in corruption, nor will I allow anyone else to do so."

Mahbubur Rahman, a presidium member of the party, said the core theme of Islami Andolan's manifesto is building a Bangladesh that reflects public aspirations. The manifesto emphasises the supremacy of Shariah, employment for youth, and a job-oriented education system, he added.

Among others, Sheikh Fazlul Karim Maruf, central publicity and dawah secretary of Islami Andolan, and Hossein Ibn Sarwar, central vice-president of the party's student wing, also addressed the rallies.