'MARKA' : The symbols mapping decades of political legacy

VISUAL: **DOWEL BISWAS**

When names alone fail, what guides a voter's choice? In Bangladesh, the answer is the symbol.

DOWEL BISWAS

A few days ago, Dhaka's social feeds lit up with a meme. Three men named Saiful, all vying for Dhaka-12 under different banners. The joke was obvious; the stakes behind it, less so. When names alone fail, what guides a voter's choice? In Bangladesh, the answer is the symbol.

Traditionally in Bangladesh, voters recognise the symbols and grasp what it promises. A tiny icon on a ballot is rarely just an icon. It carries memory, allegiance, and identity long before campaign posters or promotional materials ever reach the public.

The National Citizen Party brought the issue into focus when it hesitated over adopting the "shapla koli" *(waterlily bud)* instead of the "shapla" it had originally sought as its symbol, prompting a series of meetings with the Election Commission.

Electoral symbols in Bangladesh are semiotic anchors, mapping decades of political life into objects instantly recognised by voters. Embedded in the textures of daily life, their meanings are layered, historically rooted, and culturally resonant. They also function as tools that can shape perception and nudge voter psychology.

The paddy sheaf *(dhaner shish)* tells a significant story. Fertility, sustenance, and agrarian toil are encoded in its simple lines. Its roots stretch back to Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani's National Awami Party and later the BNP, carrying the rhythms of rice fields, seasonal labour, and rural livelihoods. The plough *(langol)*, historically associated with the Jatiya Party, signals authority over land, labour, and a grounded connection to agrarian life. These are not mere identifiers—they are vessels of expectation, memory, and lived experience.

Although Awami League is disqualified in these polls, its symbol boat *(nouka)* is also one of the most enduring. Adopted by the United Front in 1954 and carried forward by the Awami League, it signifies journey, movement, deliverance, and leadership emerging from the riverine soil of Bengal.

The daripalla, or weighing scale, long symbolised Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami's vision of justice and balance, embedding the party's ideology in a simple, instantly recognisable image.

Other culturally embedded symbols extend the narrative. Lanterns *(hariken)* and hookahs *(hukka)* evoke household routines and communal gatherings. Winnowing fans (*kula*) and bullock carts (*gorur gari*) reflect labour, transport, and local economies. Huts *(kure ghor)* conjure domestic rhythms. Animals carry meaning too: cows (*gabhi*) for sustenance, horses (*ghora*) for strength and mobility. Each symbol ties political choice to personal and communal memory.

The semiotic landscape stretches further. Banyan trees (*botgachh*) promise shelter and continuity; rising suns (*udioman surjo*) embody renewal; stars (*tara*) guide. Roses (*golap phul*) and garlands (*phuler mala*) evoke festivity, trust, and collective memory. Household objects—spades, hand fans, lanterns—anchor voters to familiar spaces. Even ephemeral cues—the sunlight in a courtyard or the rumble of a bullock cart—accrue meaning through decades of use.

Together, the full spectrum of symbols forms a living map of Bengali society. Rural life and domestic rhythms appear in hookahs, lanterns, winnowing fans, bullock carts, huts, sickles, and spades—each reflecting everyday work, household activity, and communal memory. Household objects and tools—the chair, ladder, key, wristwatch, wall clock, candle, stick, television—signal familiarity, aspiration, and the urban gaze. Transport symbols such as bicycles and rickshaws recall mobility and circulation. Communal imagery, like the hand (*panja/haat*) or dove *(kobutor)*, evoke trust, peace, and moral authority. Industrial labour finds its mark in the hammer (*haturi*). Each symbol transforms the ballot from paper into a mirror of social life, mapping history, labour, landscape, aspiration, and collective memory.

Modern and aspirational symbols—televisions, computers, mobile phones, and helicopters—signal urbanity, technology, and connectivity, yet rarely carry the same emotional weight as traditional icons. Cricket bats, tiffin carriers, telescopes, or exotic animals act as mnemonic aids or branding cues, showing how contemporary culture intersects with politics without the depth of historical embedding.

These symbols do more than facilitate recognition; they perform cognitive and emotional work. In many constituencies, a voter may not read a candidate's name but can instantly recognise the paddy sheaf, boat, plough, or hookah, linking memory, livelihood, and political allegiance. Symbols also evoke nostalgia, trust, and expectation, connecting modern aspirations to political legitimacy.

Symbols are instruments of emotional consolidation and partisan identity formation. Parties extend their reach beyond ballots—through posters, jingles, banners, and chants—anchoring candidates in memory and expectation. A familiar symbol grants instant recognition; a mismatched or unfamiliar one can unsettle voters and disrupt campaigns.

In this way, the ballot becomes a dynamic interface, where symbolic strategy, cultural memory, and political imagination ww wwwwwwwwconverge—practical, persuasive, and poetic.

NEWS

Ensure safe participation of women in polls

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violence," the statement added.

The UN noted concerns raised by women's groups and civil society organisations about violence and harassment targeting women candidates and voters, including digital abuse.

"Women in public life, including political leaders, activists, journalists, and human rights defenders, are reporting increased incidents of cyberbullying, deepfakes, coordinated harassment, and image-based abuse, including AI-altered and sexualised content."

The organisation said it has consistently advocated for women's meaningful representation and leadership with all stakeholders and is supporting the Election Commission to strengthen women's electoral participation.

"It is essential that all voters, including women, can participate as candidates and voters without intimidation, discrimination, online abuse, or fear of reprisals," the statement emphasised.

The UN expressed confidence that authorities will continue to take steps uphold security and the rule of law to ensure the safety and rights of every individual and reaffirmed its commitment to supporting the authorities in this effort.

Sports adviser's U-turn puzzles BCB

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Players, who are living through heartache of missing out on a World Cup, found Nazrul's latest comments difficult to process.

"That was funny," a player said on Nazrul's comments under conditions of anonymity.

"You heard what he said!" another said with a wry laugh.

"What can we say, we have no one. We are helpless. We don't know what to say since we had no hand in this [World Cup exclusion]. Many things don't need to be verbalised to be understood. We didn't get any help from any side," the player added.

In the board offices, some directors were also surprised by Nazrul's comments.

"He [Nazrul] had said something different before and is saying something else now. He himself had declared previously that the team will not go," a BCB director said on conditions of anonymity.

"It was never the BCB's or the players' decision to make, so, there is no scope of shifting responsibility," another BCB official claimed.

Meanwhile, a third director recalled their meetings with government officials and said, "If the decision was discussed in a cabinet meeting, how can it be the board's decision?... During several meetings with the board, they [government officials] highlighted security issues and put emphasis on not playing in India."

The Daily Star texted BCB president Aminul Islam Bulbul, who is abroad for an Asian Cricket Council (ACC) meeting, for a comment but he did not respond.

After facing widespread criticism on social media throughout the day, Nazrul posted a clarification around 10:00pm yesterday, explaining that the confusion had arisen because he had failed to convey the situation clearly.

"Since the beginning of January, I have clearly stated in various remarks that the decision not to play in the World Cup in India was the government's, based on security risks. I fully stand by that statement," he wrote.

"Despite financial losses, the deprivation of playing, and the fear of further penalties, they [BCB and players] complied. In this sense, the primary credit for the decision to forego the World Cup, in the interest of the safety of the people and the nation's dignity, belongs to them. "I acknowledge that during the press conference, I failed to explain this properly due to an unprepared response. I reiterate firmly: the decision not to participate in the World Cup was made by the government," he added.

'We will not leave the field'

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of the country, including assaults on election offices, while body-worn cameras at polling centres have not been consistently installed.

"Jamaat expects the Election Commission to address these complaints effectively; otherwise, a free, fair and acceptable election will not be possible," he said.

He cited specific incidents, saying, "Yesterday in Sylhet's Moulvibazar-1 constituency, when Jamaat's election steering committee president Abdur Rahman and other officials were returning home, they came under attack by terrorists."

Zubair also alleged that in Sirajganj, law enforcement officials publicly announced Jamaat leaders' names via loudspeakers, calling for their arrest. He added that Jamaat election agents have been targeted in Netrakona, Manikganj, Barishal and Patuakhali.

"In the Dhaka-15 constituency yesterday, 12 election camps were set on fire. Attacks like these naturally raise questions about the accountability of those responsible for law and order," he said.

Pointing to the BNP, Zubair claimed, "A group of people, believing they lack popular support, are using various tactics to undermine our party's dignity, honour and public standing."

He also alleged that in Cumilla-4, a political leader issued threats, warning that those who do not vote for them would face physical harm and property destruction. "This is a clear criminal offence," Zubair said.

He added, "We have requested the Election Commission to take immediate action. EC members have assured us that they are investigating."

"If anyone is trying to sabotage or discredit what should be a festive election, including elements hiding within law enforcement, they must be identified and brought to justice," he said.

Russian 'shadow fleet' in Danish waters almost daily: Denmark

AFP, *Copenhagen*

Tankers from Russia's "shadow fleet" circumventing European sanctions navigated through Denmark's waters at a rate of almost one a day in 2025, data compiled by the Danish Maritime Authority showed yesterday.

"In 2025, there were 292 voyages with EU sanction-designated tankers in Danish waters," the authority said in an email to AFP.

Russia has reportedly built up a flotilla of old oil tankers of opaque ownership to get around sanctions imposed by the European Union, as well as the United States and the G7 group of nations, over Moscow's 2022 all-out invasion of Ukraine.

The sanctions, aimed at limiting Moscow's revenues used to pursue its war, have shut out many tankers carrying Russian oil from Western insurance and shipping systems.

Sailing from the Gulf of Finland, through the Baltic Sea and into Danish waters, the ageing and poorly-maintained "shadow fleet" tankers mainly transport crude oil as well as refined products such as gasoline and diesel, raising concerns about the risk of an oil spill.

The size and movements of the "shadow fleet" have been hard to pin down, but thanks to the EU sanctions list, Danish authorities were in 2025 able to monitor and register the ships turning up in its waters.

The EU lists 598 vessels that are banned from European ports and maritime services.

"The Danish authorities are closely monitoring ships in Danish waters" and "also cooperate closely with like-minded countries in the Baltic Sea region," the Maritime Authority said.

"In addition, a number of concrete measures have been taken to strengthen maritime safety and the protection of the marine environment and seafarers."

BNP mobilises grassroots to boost turnout

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"In social media, on election day, some groups may try to spread propaganda and fake video clips to create fear among voters, so the party will take immediate steps to counter such misinformation and provide accurate information, ensuring that voters can go to polling centres freely and without fear," said a party leader, seeking anonymity.

BNP leaders said activists must avoid creating any disorder and instead cooperate with law enforcement agencies if any untoward incident occurs.

To boost voter turnout, BNP has planned transport support, including arranging rickshaws, vans, and other vehicles, to bring voters from distant and nearby areas to polling centres.

Party leaders said ensuring that voters are able to reach polling stations without obstruction is central to their strategy.

According to the BNP leaders, grassroots have been instructed to immediately inform election officials and police if they notice any attempt to disrupt voting.

"Fear only benefits those who want low turnout. We want a large voter turnout because we are confident about the people's mandate," said Jubo Dal President Abdul Monayem Munna, also a CESC member.

Talking to The Daily Star, Syed Emran Saleh Prince, joint secretary general of BNP and a candidate for Mymensingh-1 constituency, expressed concern over what he described as pre-election irregularities.

"We are concerned that the leaders and activists of a political party who are being caught with fake seals and money are causing various disturbances," he said, hinting at Jamaat.

"On election day, they may try to create a climate of fear to lower voter turnout and prevent the inevitable victory of BNP. We will work to increase voter participation."

According to party insiders, BNP leaders and activists have been instructed to offer Fajr prayers and then stand in voter lines early, as Jamaat will try to go early and stand in the queue first, and they may try to slow down the voting process.

At a press briefing at the party's Gulshan office yesterday, Spokesperson for CESC Mahdi Amin alleged that incidents of violence and intimidation have already been reported in several districts.

"There have been incidents of violence, sudden attacks, arson, voter intimidation, and money distribution. Law enforcers arrested many people from that party involved in the incidents."

During a meeting on Tuesday, Abdus Salam, member of BNP Chairperson's Advisory Council, said, "To win the election, polling agents must stay inside, and at the same time, 100-500 people must stay outside all the time. If they have any bad plan, it will fail. If they try to take over the centre by force, that chance cannot be given. We will give blood, but we will not leave the centre."

Salam, also the chief coordinator for the Dhaka-17, stressed that maintaining order and encouraging turnout must go hand in hand.

"A peaceful environment must be kept so that voters can come. We have to stay quietly in position, and if they try to do something, we have to take position. We must bring the voters. We have to do whatever is needed to bring voters."

Party leaders said polling agents have also been instructed to carefully monitor voting inside centres, check ballot box seals, record lock numbers, and file complaints in case of irregularities.

They have been told to send hourly updates to a central monitoring cell set up at the party's CESC office in Gulshan.

Last night, four candidates "withdrew" from the Dhaka-17 race and declared their support for Tarique, BNP's nominee in the constituency.

In another development, Bangladesh Tariqat Federation Vice-Chairman Syed Tayabul Bashar yesterday said its activists have been campaigning for the BNP.