MY DHAKA

WHY THE ADDA of Aziz Super Market is fading away

JANNATUL BUSHRA

There are certain places in Dhaka that now exist less as actual locations and more as long, emotionally charged stories older generations refuse to stop telling. Aziz Super Market is one of them.

Well, just to be clear, it still exists physically, much as it always did. But culturally, it has been quietly recast from a space where people once went to think, into one they now visit largely to reassure themselves that thinking once took place there!

At its peak, Aziz Super Market was deeply entangled with figures like Ahmed Sofa, Humayun Azad, and an entire ecosystem of writers, artists, theatre activists, and intellectuals whose sustained presence and intellectual gravity almost turned it into an unofficial cultural hub.

I will not stretch that part too much because, if you grew up in Dhaka, chances are somebody's father or uncle who owns at least one panjabi and a jhola bag has already delivered a long lecture on "what Aziz or Antel Para used to be."

And honestly, my father was no different.

I grew up hearing about Aziz Super Market the way medieval people probably heard about Atlantis -- less a place, more a story older people insist is real. For a long time, I genuinely assumed Aziz must contain at least one secret literary society, three revolutionary poets, and a man angrily quoting Sartre somewhere near a staircase.

However, when I finally decided to visit the place myself, what I found was... complicated.

Not disappointing exactly. More like running into a once-famous radical who now sells clothes but still occasionally quotes Marx between customers.

Now, before the older generation accuses me of disrespecting heritage, let me clarify something: the traces are still there!! You can absolutely sense that Aziz Super Market once mattered enormously to Dhaka's cultural crowd. The building still carries that very specific exhausted intellectual energy. There are still bookstores tucked into corners like stubborn survivors of a war.

PHOTO: JANNATUL BUSHRA

But alongside all that, there are boutiques. Panjabis. Tote bags. Food shops. Clothing stores. Random fashion outlets selling the sort of kurtis that somehow appear in every corner of Dhaka eventually.

To understand this slow transformation -- or slow surrender -- of Aziz Super Market better, we spoke to a few bookstore owners who had watched Aziz change floor by floor.

According to the owner of Kishloy Bookstore, Rafiqul Islam, previously known as Pathshala, the transformation of Aziz Super Market was gradual, shaped by higher rent agreements, rising advance payments, and the harsh economic reality that books, unfortunately, do not sell as well as panjabis before Eid.

"Bookshop owners do not earn much from selling books," he explained. "We stay because we are attached to readers more than profit. If I start selling clothes, I might earn more, but I wouldn't get to interact with the kind of people who still come searching for out-of-print books on the Bengal Renaissance, or a piece of history everyone else has already stopped caring about. Those people still come here. Fewer than before, but they still come."

We also talked to a visitor named Ezazul Karim, who is back in the country after 20 years.

"Back in my university days, Aziz Super Market was our post-uni adda spot. The old Aziz is gone, and so are my friends. If my circle had ten people, only two came back. And your generation could not fill that gap of eight readers," Karim says.

And Karim is right. Perhaps that is the quiet tragedy of Aziz Super Market in its simplest form: the readers, thinkers, writers -- the serious ones, the obsessive ones, the people willing to lose entire afternoons to thought -- still exist, just no longer in numbers large enough to resist rent, or the slow, unapologetic pragmatism of Dhaka!

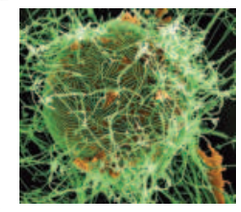
EBOLA OUTBREAK

Health workers race to respond in DR Congo

REUTERS, *Bunia*

Medical personnel were rushing yesterday to the frontlines of a new Ebola outbreak in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo whose late detection and quick spread have alarmed health experts.

The World Health Organization on Sunday declared the outbreak a public health emergency of international concern because of the high risk the disease could spread further beyond DRC's borders after two cases were confirmed in Kampala, the capital of neighbouring Uganda.



The outbreak is suspected to have killed around 80 people in recent weeks, with eight cases confirmed by laboratory testing and 246 suspected cases reported in eastern DRC's Ituri province.

Another case was confirmed in neighbouring North Kivu province's capital, Goma, according to the M23 rebels who control the city. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also said on Sunday that it was supporting partners withdrawing a small number of directly affected Americans.

A delegation led by DRC Health Minister Samuel Roger Kamba arrived in Ituri's capital Bunia on Sunday with tents to set up treatment centres to support strained local hospitals.

Mushfiqur's record

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him the 'Mr. Dependable' moniker.

Bangladesh resumed the day on 110 for three with an overall lead of 156, but Pakistan made early inroads when pacer Khurram Shahzad removed captain Najmul Hossain Shanto for 15.

From there, Mushfiqur anchored the innings with patience and control. Initially playing a supporting role to Litton Das, who continued his fluent form with a brisk 69, Mushfiqur helped steady Bangladesh through a crucial 123-run partnership for the fifth wicket.

After Litton fell to Hasan Ali, Mushfiqur shifted gears to further frustrate the visitors. He added 34 runs with Mehidy Hasan Miraz before Khurram produced another breakthrough with an outswinger that bowled Miraz.

Mushfiqur then combined with Taijul Islam in a valuable 77-run eighth-wicket stand that pushed Bangladesh's lead close to 400. The senior batter expertly shielded Taijul during the 128-ball partnership as Pakistan's bowlers continued to toil.

Pakistan, set a daunting target of 437, finished the day on nought without loss after two overs. Their highest successful chase in Test history remains 377, meaning they would need a record-breaking effort to deny Bangladesh victory.

With the Tigers already leading the series 1-0, the hosts will head into Day 4 strongly placed to seal a fourth consecutive Test win over Pakistan.

Higher power prices may hit

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Although the PDB identified 21 profitable PBSs, most of which are located in industrial belts, REB data show that only around 10 to 13 PBSs have consistently been profitable over the last five fiscal years.

REB officials fear that if the government captures a larger share of revenues from profitable PBSs through higher bulk electricity charges, the rural power distribution network could face serious liquidity stress.

Established in 1977, REB now serves around 3.79 crore consumers across the country, accounting for nearly 77 percent of Bangladesh's total electricity users. In terms of electricity consumption, REB accounts for around 57 percent of the national power supply.

However, the consumer composition differs sharply across PBSs. Residential users account for around 56 percent of REB power consumption, but PBSs in industrial corridors are significantly more profitable than residential-focused PBSs.

Dhaka-1 PBS emerged as the highest-earning PBS in FY25, with earnings of Tk 615 crore, followed by Gazipur-1 with Tk 565 crore and Narayanganj-1 with Tk 522 crore.

The other profitable PBSs identified by PDB are Chattogram-1 and 3, Gazipur-2, Mymensingh-2, Narayanganj-2, Dhaka-2 and -4, Narsingdi-1 and -2, Cumilla-2 and -3, Bagerhat, Patuakhali, Habiganj, Moulvibazar, Manikganj, Munshiganj, and Cox's Bazar.

Despite internal subsidy transfers, REB continues to face growing financial pressure.

According to REB's submission to BERC, the organisation incurred a loss of Tk 1,698 crore in FY25. The loss is projected to increase to Tk 2,387 crore in the ongoing FY26 and further to Tk 2,897 crore in FY27.

REB's average loss stood at Tk 0.34 per kilowatt-hour (kWh) in FY25 and has now increased to Tk 0.44 per unit. For FY27, the gap is projected to widen to Tk 0.50 per kWh, prompting REB to seek a corresponding increase in retail electricity tariffs.

The REB submission reads, "If wholesale electricity and transmission costs increase further, the additional burden would need to be passed on to consumers through retail tariffs.

"90 percent of our customers are residential, of which 49 percent [1.63 crore] are lifeline customers, who pay Tk 4.63 per unit -- far lower than the average retail tariff of Tk 8.95 per kWh."

PDB officials involved in the tariff review process argued that industrial-heavy PBSs now operate in ways similar to urban electricity distributors and therefore should not continue receiving comparatively favourable bulk electricity pricing.

Energy sector analysts, however, warned that weakening the cross-subsidy structure without broader reform could ultimately increase pressure on government subsidies or rural electricity tariffs.

M Shamsul Alam, energy adviser to the Consumers Association of Bangladesh, told The Daily Star that only a small number of PBSs operating in major industrial zones generate enough surplus to sustain the wider rural distribution system.

"The number of PBSs that actually support the cross-subsidy mechanism is very limited. Outside a few industrial belts like Gazipur and Narayanganj, most PBSs are not profit-making in practical terms.

"If profitable PBSs are forced to bear higher bulk electricity costs, their ability to support weaker PBSs will shrink. In that case, government subsidies may rise further instead of falling."

He also alleged that the proposal could revive debates over corporatising PBS operations, an issue that sparked resistance within the rural electrification sector in previous years.

BERC is scheduled to begin public hearings on the proposal tomorrow at the Krishibid Institution Auditorium.

Govt moves to draft law for Rab

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whether the force would retain the name "Rab".

A committee comprising experts has already been formed to draft the law, he said, adding that Rab had long operated under provisions of the Armed Police Battalion Ordinance on an ad hoc basis, which is inappropriate for such a force.

The remarks come amid longstanding domestic and international criticism of the force over allegations of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and other human rights violations.

Rab was established in April 2004 during the BNP-led government of former prime minister Khaleda Zia. In 2014, then BNP chairperson Khaleda herself also called for the force to be disbanded.

In 2021, the US imposed sanctions on Rab and six of its then-current and former officials over allegations of serious human rights abuses.

On December 10, 2024, the BNP proposed disbanding the force.

On February 12, 2025, the UN human rights office (OHCHR) recommended disbanding Rab following a UN fact-finding report on human rights violations linked to the July uprising.

Replying to a question on the US sanctions, Salahuddin said the force's image had been tarnished by the actions of some officials.

"No institution remained unaffected during the fascist regime. The police, army, Rab, and BGB ... all. But the entire institution cannot be held responsible for the actions of a few officials."

He said the government instructed the relevant authorities to make those responsible for wrongdoing accountable in accordance with the law. "The US sanctions are still in place. However, if Rab is renamed or a new elite force is raised, they might reconsider the sanctions."

Responding to a question, the minister said, "Morning shows the day. The current government has been in office for three months. Has Rab, police or any other force been used politically so far?"

On a question regarding the enforced disappearance of BNP leader Ilias Ali, the minister said, "Ilias Ali's wife has filed a case with the ICT tribunal, and so have I. The strongest judicial framework currently exists within the ICT law. The commission on enforced disappearances had certain limitations, as it did not specify punitive measures.

"If necessary amendments can be made to the ICT law, then all cases related to enforced disappearances can be tried under it. There were also some legal limitations, and we are working on those as well."

5-year plan eyes trillion-dollar economy

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strengthening social safety nets to protect the vulnerable from the shocks of inflation.

It would be managing the import pressures by prioritising essential commodities and facilitating easier remittance inflows.

The government would also be taking immediate steps to resolve the liquidity crisis in the banking sector and provide emergency support to the agriculture and small and medium enterprise (SME) sectors.

In the second phase, which will conclude at year three of the five-year plan, the focus would be on rebuilding systems and institutions.

Jumpstarting investment would be the main focus in this phase. Steps would be taken to remove regulatory barriers and open up financing opportunities to restore private sector confidence.

Deep reforms would be taken in the banking sector, the issue of defaulted loans would be addressed, and systemic risks would be reduced.

Trade logistics would be developed, sector-based diversification would be pursued, and youth employment programmes would be prioritised.

In this phase, strict alignment of the national budget would be ensured with strategic planning, and domestic revenue collection would be increased.

In the final phase, which will be in the last two years of the five-year plan, growth acceleration will be prioritised.

Both public and private investment would be increased in the manufacturing and high-value-added sectors, and the export base would be widened by engaging with complex global value chains.

To lower the cost of doing business, climate-resilient energy, transport, and digital infrastructure would be designed.

The government will also ensure that the benefits of economic growth play a direct role in reducing inequality through universal social protection.

In the acceleration phase, growth will be primarily driven by private investment, which includes foreign direct investment (FDI) rising to 2.5 percent of GDP.

The government has set an ambitious but realistic revenue mobilisation plan.

It has targeted increasing total revenue by 3 percent of GDP led by digitisation and full integration across all economic sectors and developing a stronger tax culture within the country.

The macroeconomic framework projects that total revenue as a percentage of GDP will rise from 8 percent in fiscal 2024-25 to 11 percent by fiscal 2029-30.

There are specific plans for the agriculture sector and the youth.

The government plans to transform the agriculture sector from traditional methods to a high-tech, market-driven ecosystem.

The strategy envisions a central hub for agriculture that integrates digital innovation and agritech, smart farming, value-added processing, global value chain integration, and sustainable resource management. The government would also ensure the long-term viability of land and water.

One-stop service centres would be set up to provide all necessary agricultural support services to farmers, while steps would be taken to ensure efficient water and resource management.

Steps would be taken to establish direct connections between the agricultural sector and industrial manufacturing.

Bangladesh will be entering the critical phase of its demographic dividend, and special emphasis will be given to making the most of it.

Themain barrier to unleashing the demographic dividend has been the mismatch between educational outcomes and the actual demands of the labour market, coupled with a persistent digital divide between urban and rural areas.

A National Foundational Learning Mission would be launched that would mandate daily periods for reading and numeracy. Targeted remedial classes would be arranged that would group students by their actual competency level rather than just their age.

A national teacher competency framework would be put in place, shifting away from rote-learning methods toward continuous professional development and digital pedagogical training.

The government would bedigitising teacher attendance and the management of school grants, deploying school performance dashboards for better oversight, and gradually increasing the national education budget toward a target of 4–5 percent of GDP.

The Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) would be modernised to ensure it accounts for a 25 percent share of education by 2030.

Mandatory internships and career counselling centres would be introduced, while industry advisory boards would ensure educational outcomes match market demands.

Youth and women would get special attention, and there would be equitable healthcare services to enhance the productivity of the national workforce.

The government also has a three-pronged approach to boosting the creative sector's economic contribution.

About 200,000 youth (Gen Z/Alpha) would be upskilled in digital and creative arts, and the Bangladesh Creative Development Authority would be established with 64 district creative hubs.

A "Creative in Bangladesh" brand would be launched, and 100 Bangladeshi films/shows would be made for global streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon, and Disney+.

As many as 46 vulnerable heritage sites would be climate-proofed, while 40 heritage tourism sites would be renovated. The government would also introduce the "Heritage Award".

The stepswould ensure that the creative sector's contribution to GDP would increase from the existing 0.17 percent to 1.5 percent by 2035.

SNIPPETS OF PLAN

- Upskilling 2 lakh youth (Gen Z/Alpha) in digital, creative arts
- Growing creative sector's GDP contribution from 0.17% to 1.5% by 2035
- Integrating ICT, science, vocational training into madrasa curricula
- Recognising Qawmi certificates for government jobs
- Strengthening Welfare Trusts for minority communities