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SUPPLEMENT S1

SHIFTING shelves



Supershops adapt to LOCAL TASTES AND TIGHTER BUDGETS

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On Thursday evenings, Rumana Akter finishes marking exercise books, picks up her grocery bag and walks ten minutes to the supermarket on the main road of her district town. She used to send her husband to the bazaar on Fridays with a list and a warning about onion prices. Now she goes herself, trolley in hand, keeping most of the list in her head.

"I like that I can pick things up and read the label," she said. "At the bazaar, I'd just trust the man. Here, I can compare two packets of lentils and nobody's watching me do it."

She buys rice and oil there, along with frozen parathas her children like and a tray of marinated chicken she would have laughed at five years ago. However, she still buys vegetables at the Saturday market because they are fresher and she knows whom to ask.

Her routine reflects what supershops have changed for a growing number of households, and what they have not. They have altered how many urban families shop but have yet to replace the bazaar.

Modern stores account for only about 2.5% of Bangladesh's retail market, compared with 12% to 30% in India, Sri Lanka and Indonesia, according to media reports. Figures from the supermarket owners' association, cited by Prothom Alo, put the number of supershops at more than 1,500. About 600 are chain outlets, while the rest are local businesses operating one or two stores.

Shwapno leads the chains, accounting for more than 50% of the supermarket market, with over 500 outlets serving more than 100,000 customers a day, according to media reports. Prothom Alo named Daily Shopping, Meena Bazar, Agora, Amana Big Bazar, Unimart and Prince Bazar among the other players. Independent businesses also remain important, particularly outside the capital.

Mizanur Rahman runs one such business in an upazila. He started selling groceries in the 1990s with a counter and a ledger.

"My father weighed everything out by hand," he said. "Now people pick their own. It took a few years before customers stopped asking staff to fetch things." He now maintains stock records on a computer, reorders according to demand and buys packaged goods through distributors instead of local wholesalers. Barcode billing has ended the weekly arguments over prices by providing printed receipts. However, margins on branded goods remain thin, while rent, electricity and wages put pressure on his business.

For national chains, expansion requires adapting to local demand. Tanvir Hasan, a regional manager at a national chain, said outlets outside Dhaka were not simply copies of those in the capital.

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ILLUSTRATION: **S. M. TAHMID**

