

# A walk through the old city

Shankhari Bazaar is named after the famous profession it has supported for more than four hundred years

SHUVO HOSSAIN AND BISHAWJIT DAS

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Shankhari Bazaar: The lane is named after the famous profession it has supported for more than four hundred years. Shankhari workers, who have been working conch shells into ornaments for hundreds of years. Densely crowded with old buildings, the lane will give you a flavour of medieval days with a variety of different manual-labour professions.

The five hundred-yard long lane stretches from Johnson Road, right beside the city's Judge-court to Islampur road.

Entering the lane you will first find the *Ukilpara* (Lawyers' chambers) and *Shani Thakurer Mandir* (Temple of Shani deity) to your right. The lane ends with a famous *biriani* house (Kashmiri, is its recent name) and the police station at the left.

When you're walking along Shankhari bazaar, watch out or

you'll be run over by a rickshaw. They whisk people and goods up and down the tiny crowded streets. There are people going to and from their tiny houses to dump trash. These thick-walled houses are antiques of ten by eight feet, where an average of six to eight family members lives.

There are food stores and barbershops common fare for a shopping area. But often, there will be some profession that is necessary to the traditional Bengali lifestyle, but not as common as hearing the *azan* ringing through the air.

People usually are married at least once in their lives. For the ceremony you will find many things here, like hats for the bride and groom. To make the ceremony complete, you will also find decorations for the wedding hall, along with incense. For music, if you want the high quality handmade product, purchase a harmonium and tabla from a factory in the

area. Conch shells artisans are the origin dwellers in this street. The fine bangles that the artisans produce are a product of manual skill which countries like India, Srilanka and Thailand have replaced with electrical machines. This profession has been continued through generations of family members.

Apart from the conch-bangles there are also stone and marble engravings. Stones known as *pata-puta* are ubiquitous in Bengali-kitchens for crushing spices. These *patas* and *putas* are beautifully engraved with different landscapes of Bangladesh and social scenes.

Shankhari Bazar also produces various kinds of colourful kites and *natais* (the spindle) to fly kites. *Paush sankranti* (the eve of the month of Paush) is one of the biggest events in the old city when thousands of kites fly in the sky. Kite-lovers wait with anticipation all year for this very occasion

and people of all ages fly their kites and fight with them in the air.

A part and parcel of every Hindu marriage are the hats that the bride and groom use. These are also to be found in Shankhari Bazar. These fine crafted products were traditionally made with local cork. Though nowadays many prefer the more modern, imported polystyrene, some still think the earlier natural product was finer and lighter.

If you ask around, you will also find the Nandi brothers here, who's family is famous for living in Shankhari Bazar for more than ten generations. Their fathers and fore-fathers were engaged with the original *shankhari* (conch) products; but in the late 70's they switched to making *mukut* (wedding-hats), kites and other ornamental goods used in weddings and *pujas* (Hindu worship), as there was a shortage of conch imports into the town.



The style of houses and the atmosphere in this part of the old town reminds us of a different time.

## A short history of Shankhari Bazar

The nineteenth century historian, James Wise, provides most of the information about the famous conch-artisans of Shankhari Bazar. According to James Wise, in the 1880s, there were 11,453 conch-artisans in the whole of Bengal. Out of these, 2,735 used to live in East-Bengal, 835 in Dhaka, and the rest in Bakhraganj.

He wrote that these artisans originally came to East Bengal with Raja Ballal Sen before the 17<sup>th</sup> century. They first settled in Shankhari Bazar at Bikrampur. When the Mughals were in power during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, they brought them to Dhaka promising them *lakhranj* land (land free of taxes). They chose to settle in the area where the present Shankhari Bazar is still situated now.

When the explorer, Tavernier came to Bengal in 1666, he noticed the artisan community at Shankhari Bazar, which means they have been in the very same place for four centuries.

The land at Shankhari Bazar and Tanti Bazar was as expensive as Banani and Gulshan are now, informs another historian of the mid-nineteenth century.

The houses of this artisan community are a bit different from other ordinary houses. Wise said that the land that artisans were given was very long and narrow in area, and the houses were designed according to the size and shape of the land.

Most of these houses were two storied with a 6 foot entrance gate and 20-30 foot long corridor leading to the inside of the house. Taylor said that there are many four-storied buildings with only 8-10 feet space in the front and without any doors or

windows at the side. These buildings are again 20 foot long with only the back end covered with a roof, and a small opening in the middle of the ground floor. If any artisans lived outside the designated land of the artisans he was isolated from society. Probably this is why they lived in this place for ages.

Wise said that the artisans were mostly vegetarians following the Hindu gods Vishnu or Krishna. They did not work at the time of their largest festival in the later part of the month Vaddra. Wise also said that the artisans lived a filthy life and due to this they were vulnerable to diseases. So the municipality forced them to take vaccines. The women of the community were expected to stay mainly in the home.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the historian Hridaynath Majumder describes the artisans as making bangles for the Hindu community, although rich people used to get their bangles from Singhol (Sri Lanka). The government used to support the industry by leasing the sea-areas where the conches grew. The leasees used to collect conches with the help of fishermen and sold them to the retail sellers, who provided them to the artisans.

In 1971, The Pakistan Army razed Shankhari Bazar to the ground. After Independence the artisans began settling again in the same place, but the area has lost much of its flavour since.

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Source: MUNTASIR MAMUN, *Dhaka Smriti Bisitri Nagari*.

## Stones and spices Creating a harmonious way of life

The markets of the city are full of powdered spices. But still there are many housewives who prefer crush fresh spices manually at home rather than buying packeted powders.

To crush spices, Bengal has its own tool, the *sheel pata* and *puta*, (the platform and the crusher), which is named after the stone 'sheel'.

"There are different qualities of stone, better ones come from Bindarchar in India. They are heavier, wider, and durable. Imanganj of Sylhet district produces some, but the quality is not as good as those from India," said Sekander, an engraver.

"Stones of different sizes and weights are imported, and we cut and

give them shape to make them handy. Let's say, a 12x20 inch stone is cut to 11x18 inches," said Sekander.

How much are the engravers paid? "It depends on the size of the work, we are paid Tk. 35 for a medium size *pata* and Tk.15 to cut a *puta*, which are then sold for Tk. 300 and Tk. 50," explained Sekander.

Not only *pata* and *puta*, they also engrave *jata*, the crusher to break pulses, various crops, and *chandana pata* (sandalwood crusher). You will find at least one of this in each and every house of the Hindu community for they use sandalwood in their worship.

Although he doesn't encourage his children to follow in his footsteps, he is still optimistic that his profession will continue.



## Making mukuts

Mukut is the traditional wedding hat the Hindu community has used for centuries. Both groom and bride wear *mukut* of two distinct shapes and design.

The *mukut* of Shankhari Bazar is very famous for its quality and design all over Bangladesh. The artisans behind this production are a secluded group.

Samar, Ratan and Bishnu, three brothers, have been engaged in this profession for more than 20 years. They are one of the oldest families in Shankhari Bazar, living for 12 generations. Once they used to be the conch artisans, but they shifted professions.

"After independence, there was a ban on conch-importing. So, we had very little to do. And we shifted to this

profession," said Sunil Kumar Nandi. "There was once a Ramesh Malakar, our *guru* (master/teacher), who taught us how to make these *mukuts*. But he is no more in this area."

There are two sorts of material with which these artisans make *mukuts*. One is the foreign-imported polystyrene, and the other is local cork.

It takes almost a day for two artisans to make a *mukut*. A well-made *mukut* costs almost Tk. 1000 to Tk 1200. "We also have the cheaper ones, of Tk. 500 a pair," explained Nandi.

Apart from the cork, we also use *chumki*, *jari* (silver thread) and different colours for the designs.

Jessore, Bikrampur, Faridpur, Malitola are the different places who also produce such materials, but the *mukuts* of Shkankhari Bazar are unique in kind and elegance.



## Cool conch bangles



The proverbial *Shankher Karaat*, a double-edged saw, is no longer found in Shankhari Bazar in Old Dhaka or anywhere else, for that matter. But that did not stop the artisans who have been in this trade for generations.

Artisans who inherited the craft from their ancestors are now using electric blades in crafting conch bangles. "Shankha crafting is a fourth generation profession for me," says Nakuneswar Naag.

Shankha of Shakhariabazar is unique, compared to other places like Tangail, Khulna and even India. Its design, elegance, variety and craftsmanship are superb.

Shankha is the symbol of marriage for Hindus. Hindu women wear *shankha* for the welfare of their husbands, they believe. So, the

*shankha* market sprang up some centuries ago. Modern women wear *shankha* as ornaments.

Carving bangles out of conch shells is like making a sculpture out of stones. Seven different artisans pull off their mastery to produce a finished product.

"The raw material, the conch shell, is not available in Bangladesh. We import it from Sri Lanka," says Nakuleswar.

"India does produce some shells too, but the quality isn't that good."

The price for the raw conch shells ranges between Tk 19,000 and Tk 29,000 a sack, depending on size, weight and quality.

They produce two kinds of shells; *kari*, weighty and firm, and *jhanji*, softer and naturally designed.

describes Ashish, a conch artisan. "Then we break the upper portion of the shell."

"People from some herbal medicine shops take that *peta*, the dead body, to make medicine for liver diseases," explains Swapan, a conch breaker. "So, the wastes of shells are not at all a wastage. Even the dust of shell is sold Tk 2 per *tola*. People use that to remove the scars from faces."

"Then we wash the shells several times for a good clean," says Ashish. "The most difficult task comes next, to cut the conch into bangle shape and to make the most use of the shell without damaging the body."

"The bangles are then designed with various motifs. Designers create the patterns of on the bangle according to its size, depth and density.

Depending on the model, each will earn its maker Tk 780-1050. They will sell for an average Tk 2800, but can get much more expensive, as the better wood used and more sets of reeds implemented.

With 15 shops on the street, and 50 throughout the country, things aren't going as well for Mondol as they used to. He attributes competition and the traffic in the area that used to be the center of many *addas* as to why the demand for his product has lowered.

But he will continue "as long as his body will support him." Although he doesn't have enough faith in the worth of his profession to encourage his children to follow in his footsteps, he is still optimistic that

his profession will continue. "Whoever's interested in music will buy them, they help beginners find their pitch," he says.

"No, I don't want my kids involved in this profession. It had a great prestige once, but we have just become labours now," he grugged.

Jatin and Co. was and still is one of the famous instruments makers in Bangladesh. "It was the meeting centre for all the famous singers of Dhaka city. They used to come and gossip for hours," said Sunil, the owner of the company

## Kites and spindles

Paush Sangkranti (the eve of the month *Paush*) is the festival for all kite lovers. Each year on this day thousands of kites fly in the air above old Dhaka. There are no age barriers to kite-fighting and winning glory.

Sahnkhari Bazar produces the best quality kites and *natais*, the spindles for the string.

Wondering how are they made? With *muli-bash* (a type of bamboo) and china tissue paper. "We buy the china tissue at Tk 400 for each ream, the price for coloured papers is a bit higher," said Bishnu Nandi, a kite-maker at Shankhari Bazar.

The cost of kites? "They differ in size and design," said Nandi. "We sell kites from Tk. 1 to Tk. 5 each, depending on the size, colour and design." The *natais* cost from Tk. 20 to Tk. 150.

