



Nauka Baich (boat Race)

## Losing a glorious tradition

The atmosphere -- electrifying, the mood -- buoyant and the scenes -- spectacular. Rowers in racing boats brace for a high-octane competition. Men, women and children in small boats dot the riverscape to urge the rowers on. A full-on display of spontaneity of the people of all ages, coming together to relive a fading event.

The race started on the river amid cheers of jubilant crowds and amplified blares of music. It was exhilarating to watch a series of racing boats cutting a quick, white swath through the monsoon-swollen water and sending ripples against the riverbank.

Boat race, a traditional sport in riverine Bangladesh, is popularly known as *baich* that derives from

the word *baoa* meaning rowing in English.

The boat race is still organised by local people of the areas like Norail, Munshiganj, Narayanganj, Pabna, Serajganj, Sylhet, Brahmanbaria, Narsingdi and Daudkandi.

Villagers living close to rivers are accustomed to rowing boat naturally irrespective of men, women and children. The boat race is organised in villages as a part of tradition. The rich and influential people of the community take responsibility of organising the event. "It needs collective efforts," said Ahmed Hossain Talukdar, chairman of Goalmari Union Parishad in Daudkandi.

The chairman arranges boat race every year not to let the tradition die down. The area he lives in cannot be accessed by road and boats have become the only mode of transport for the people of the area. The *baich* has a tremendous influence on villagers. Mindful of the race, the women of the village visit their parents' homes from husbands' a visit locally known as *naiori*. "One of my relatives came to my home after many years to watch the race," said the chairman.

Boat race is a festival for the local people. People from outlying places come to the place of race to be a part of the festive mood. A virtual fair takes place on the river, as vendors float around in boats to sell goods to the spectators.

The spectators arrive in boats and watch the race on the river from both sides marked by bamboo poles and ropes for them.

Families in small boats with five to six rowers come to enjoy the race. Everyone seems good at rowing that has become part of life.

Bangla songs and music from the boats and colourful band parties amplify the atmosphere with cheery vibration. Spontaneous participation of housewives and young girls gives the atmosphere a festive look

and a sense of cultural cohesiveness.

Band parties, singers and dancers cheer up jubilant crowds in boats. School-age girls in colourful dress row small boats to escort the special guests on the river.

The racing boats with 25 to 100 rowers and a *majhi* or mast man took part in the competition. Each team of rowers wore colourful jerseys, sang folk songs and played local drums and bells to spur the rowers on and to the tune of the gorgeous atmosphere.

As the race started, jubilant spectators many of them accompanied by rowers started to cheer their boats up. Prizes like colour television and cassette player are distributed among the winners.

*Chhip* boats, especially made with 25 to 100 rows each for a race, are disappearing. Due to high costs, people do not prefer making *chhip* boats.

*Sharingi* is also used for the race. *Sharingis* are available as people could also use them to carry cargo. The most common boat is called *kosha* used for 25 rowers.

*Baich* is vanishing with the disappearance of elegant *chhip* boats. Bangladesh Rowing Federation arranges *baich* every year on the Buriganga and other parts of the country.

This year, the fate of a *baich* on the Buriganga is uncertain due to the lack of sponsor. "It needs at least Tk 8 lakh to organise a race," said a high official of the federation.

As a traditional sport and heritage, *baich* seems to be living in the hearts of people. As Bengali heritage, it has become a symbol of social status. Kalimullah Prodhan, the member of Boalmari Union Parishad, said: "People used to ask whether the member has a *nao* or *baich* boat."

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