

# How Chittagonians acquired a foreign taste

|| MOSTAFA YOUSUF ||



## PORT CITY CHRONICLES

Out of clay ovens and into Gani Bakery packaging, a bunch of Bela biscuits sit atop a counter, ready to go into buyers' kitchen cabinets. Below, the storefront of Gani Bakery reads "We Have No Branches", as if to drive home its uniqueness.

PHOTO: RAJIB RATHAN

There's a biscuit for every hour of the day. We start the morning dipping toast biscuits in tea, we go into midday on savory biscuits, and munch on low-cal crackers when on diet. These little blocks of delight have become such a regular feature of our lives that it's hard to realise that they aren't actually native to our land, but foreign imports from our colonised past.

Our biscuits, cake and bread were originally a part of Portuguese and Mughal food habits. When they settled in this region, they brought this part of their culture to cater to their needs.

According to historians, bakery industries kicked off in Chattogram after people of the then British India's Bardhaman district migrated to this land at the end of the Mughal era.

Of the many varieties of biscuits these bakers made here, a new genre completely matched locals' taste. This is the legendary Bela biscuit, a trademark of Chittagonian food culture. Today, its renown matches even that of the ultra-popular Mejbhan dish.

The pioneer of the Bela biscuit in Chattogram is Gani Bakery, which laid the foundation of the unique snack and earned prominence in producing it across the port city.

Exactly when Gani Bakery started baking Bela biscuits is not known, but researchers of Chattogram believe Kha Subedar and his son Kanu Kha introduced the snack to locals.

Ahmed Mamtaj, assistant director of Bangla Academy, researched on Gani Bakery as an important part of Chattogram's lore. He told The Daily Star that Lak Kha Subedar and his relatives, who knew how to make the bakery items, were brought

into the area by Mughals who settled here around 1664.

The bakery industry flourished after the Mughals conquered Chattogram. Not just bakery, food items like vermicelli and polao were also introduced to this region by the Mughals, Ahmed Mamtaj said.

According to the researcher, Bela biscuit was an experimental byproduct of the process of making key bakery items.

"The Bela biscuit fit right in to the taste



palette of Chittagonians, which helped it gain popularity among our people," he added.

### GANI BAKERY

In 2020, Gani Bakery stands as a one-storey structure located at the port city's Chandanpura area, just hundred yards away from Chattogram College. However, its journey started more than a hundred years ago.

Abdul Gani Soudagor, the man who put the "Gani" in the bakery's name, got into the industry way back in 1878, at the young age of 10. He died in 1973, aged 105. In this lifetime, he elevated both his bakery and the Bela biscuit to prominence.

Of his many tales, of particular note is

the story of his role during the World War 2. During the war, Abdul Gani made a huge fortune after an Australian brigadier contracted Gani Bakery to supply them with baked goods. The snacks were consumed by the allied forces all across the region, even in the then Burma.

After his death, his nephew Danu Soudagor took the helm. He handed the bakery down to his son Jamal Uddin, who died in 1987. After the death of Jamal, the bakery is now run by his son Abdullah Mohammed Ehtesam.

HOW THE CRUNCHY DELIGHT IS MADE To preserve the legend of the Bela biscuit, Gani Bakery still resorts to large clay ovens to bake the dough instead of electric ovens and adds a unique liquid ingredient to keep the biscuit's taste unharmed, current owner Ehtesam told this to The Daily Star during a recent visit.

This is a "quality over quantity" strategy adopted by the bakery.

It takes two days from beginning to end to bake the snacks, although it would take only 24 hours in electric ovens.

A secret liquid syrup is added to sugar, salt, milk powder and vegetable oil to make the dough that goes into the clay oven.

After 48 hours, round and crispy Bela biscuits make their way to the shelves of the bakery, to be bought by buyers who cannot get enough of it, Ehtesam said.

Besides Gani Bakery there are a few more companies that bake Bela biscuits, with big names such as Well Food, Flavors, Ispahani and Pran group are among them.

After satisfying Chattogram and the rest of the country, the biscuit is now being exported to many countries, including Australia, Canada, the USA and the UK.

# Eight killed in road, train accidents

## STAR REPORT

Eight people were killed in separate road and train accidents across the country over the last two days, report our correspondents and a news agency.

In Chattogram, a freedom fighter and a retired army officer was killed in a road accident on Dhaka-Chattogram highway at Shitalpur Bhogla Bazar yesterday afternoon.

The deceased -- Mohammad Shafi (75) -- was also a retired colonel of Bangladesh Army, police said.

The accident occurred as Shafi was crossing the road at Bhogla Bazar under Shitakunda upazila around 12:30pm when a private car ran him over and left him critically injured, said Assistant Sub-Inspector of Chattogram Medical College Hospital (CMCH) Police Camp Alaudding Talukder.

Locals rescued and rushed him to CMCH, where physicians declared him dead around 1:30pm.

Two people were killed and at least 10 injured as a Chattogram-bound night coach collided with a covered van in Jogonnath Dighi area on the Dhaka-Chattogram highway in Chauddagram yesterday, reports our Cumilla correspondent.

The deceased were identified as Abdul Kader (46), driver of the covered van, and Md Rasel (35), supervisor of the coach.

AKA Sarfuddin, in-charge of Miabazar Highway Police Outpost, said, "The accident occurred after the covered van lost control and drove into a road divider. It was then hit from the rear side by the speeding night coach. The front side of the bus crushed supervisor Rasel while covered van driver Kader was crushed under the van after he jumped out of it in panic."

Police and fire fighters rushed to the spot and rescued the injured passengers by taking them to Chauddagram Upazila Health Complex, where they were given primary treatment.

Meanwhile in Mymensingh, a biker was killed and his friend critically injured in a

road crash at Kanthali in Bhaluka upazila, reports our Mymensingh correspondent.

Quoting locals, Officer-in-Charge of Bhaluka Police Station Mohammad Mainuddin said deceased Abdullabel Kafi (31) and his friend Abu Bakar Siddique (30) were on a bike on their way to Dhaka when the accident occurred on the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway.

At one point, the bike skidded off the road as the motorcyclist lost control over it, injuring themselves critically, the OC added.

They were rushed to Bhaluka Upazila Health Complex where doctors declared Kafi dead. In the meantime, Abu Bakar was referred to Mymensingh Medical College Hospital after his condition deteriorated.

Police have seized the bike. A case has been lodged in this regard.

In Nilphamari, an elderly man was killed early yesterday after a pick-up crashed into his bicycle at Bottoli point in Domar upazila, reports our Nilphamari correspondent.

The deceased was identified as Luthfar Rahman (60), a matchmaker by profession.

Police and locals said the victim was going to Gomnati village on his bicycle for work, when he was suddenly hit by the pick-up. The accident occurred when the area was covered by a lot of fog, locals said.

Locals detained driver Rubel Haque (35), who got stuck in a pile of sand while trying to escape the scene in high speed. He was later handed over to the police.

In Jashore, a woman was killed after being hit by a motorbike on Rajganj-Trimohoni road in Monirampur upazila on Friday morning, reports our Benapole correspondent.

The deceased was identified as Anwara Begum (65). Anwara was hit by the motorbike while she was out on her daily walk, a habit she maintained due to her diabetes.

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## UN model confce at AUW from Feb 13

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Cg

A three-day international model United Nations conference will begin at Asian University for Women (AUW) in Chattogram city on February 13, says a press release.

AUW International Model United Nations Club will organise the event, to be participated by more than 300 youths from schools, universities and different organisations.

They will be playing the roles of representatives from different nations. The participants will be raising different crises the world is currently facing and their possible solutions.

Seven committees will discuss intense issues -- including international criminal law, human rights, drugs and crimes, and women rights.

## Historic Kagmari Conference Day observed in Tangail

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

The 63rd anniversary of historic Kagmari Conference Day was observed at Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University in Tangail yesterday.

In the morning, Bhashani Parishad placed a wreath at the memorial plaque that was constructed on the campus on the occasion of the conference's 50th anniversary. Of the numerous political programmes organised by Bhasani during his long political life, Kagmari Conference of 1957 remains the most prominent and unforgettable one, said speakers at the event.

It is a milestone in the history of the movement for independent Bangladesh. The pledge to form a non-communal and democratic country was declared from the conference, they added.

Kagmari Conference, the council meeting of the then opposition Awami League along with a cultural conference, was held on February 6-10 in 1957 at Kagmari in Tangail.

The main agenda for discussion in the session was full autonomy for the then East Pakistan.

Among others, Mohammad Mofizul Islam Maznu, president Bhashani Parishad; Mohammad Ipiar Hossain, president of the university unit of the parishad; MA Azad Sobhani Al Bhashani, general secretary of the unit, attended yesterday's event.

# Flowers mark a festive February

## Jashore farmers expect sales to cross Tk 70cr

UNB, Jashore

February is an eventful month, with Pahela Falgun, Valentines' Day, and International Mother Language Day lined up. Each occasion is unique, but flowers are an integral part of all three events.

Flower farmers in Jashore's Jhikargacha are gearing up for this busy season, expecting to sell flowers worth around Tk 70-80 crore this month.

According to Bangladesh Flower Society, at least 8,000 people are involved in floriculture on around 3,500 hectares of land there.

Around 12 species of flowers are cultivated in Jhikargacha. Of total production, gladiolus cultivation is 45 percent, tuberose (rajanigandha) 25 percent, and rose 20 percent. Gerbera, gypsy, calendula, sunflower, and marigold are also grown.

Rafiqul Islam, a gardener, said he has cultivated tuberose, double tuberose, hybrid tuberose, rose, gerbera, marigold and gladiolus. He is expecting to sell flowers worth Tk 2 lakh.

Rafiqul said it costs Tk 1 lakh to cultivate rose on one bigha land. The price of 4,000 rose saplings is around Tk 50,000, while other costs add up to Tk 50,000. From each sapling, he will get flowers for up to seven years.

Another farmer, Amzad Hossain, said he is expecting to sell flowers worth Tk 1.5 lakh if the weather remains favourable.

Bablu Miah, a gerbera flower cultivator, said he was selling around 5,000 flowers every week. "I



Rows of flowers adorn the fields at Jhikargacha in Jashore, ready for plucking. Inset, a seller arranges red roses for display. Seventy percent of the country's flower supply comes from this district.



hope to sell flowers worth Tk 4 lakh this month," he said.

Bangladesh Flower Society President Abdur Rahim said around four million people across the country are involved in this sector. Among them, around 30,000 are farmers. In Jashore, 10,000-12,000 farmers are involved with flower cultivation.

This year the farmers are expecting sales to cross Tk 70-80 crore as the weather has been

favourable so far, he said.

Sadhon Kumar Biswas, upazila nirbahi officer, said the government has taken a number of initiatives for the flower farmers, including arranging training and easy bank loans for them.

Flower cultivation in Jhikargacha's Godkhali began in 1983 on a meager 30 decimal of land, said Abdur Rahim.

Nearly four decades later, the cultivation has spread to over

3,500 hectares, he said, "Flowers cultivated here are being exported to Dubai, Malaysia, Singapore and North Korea," he said.

The wholesale flower market at Godkhali is the source of 70 percent of the country's entire flower supply.

Whether to make a colourful crown on Falgun, gift a loved one on Valentines' Day, or pay respect to martyrs on Ekushey -- there is a flower for every occasion.

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রাজধানীর আগ্রহকেন্দ্র দৈনিক বাংলা মোড়ে ২৫ তলা বিশিষ্ট দুইনন্দন  
**বিএসসি টাওয়ার** এ ২৪তম ফ্লোর (৩৯৮৯ বর্গফুট) কমাশিয়াল  
স্পেস অনামদখ্য (সরকারি/বেসরকারি সংস্থা/ব্যাকে/বীমা/বানিজ্যিক)  
প্রতিষ্ঠানের নিকট ভাড়া দেয়া হবে। বিএসসি টাওয়ারে অভ্যুপস্থিত  
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হল।

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মোবাইল ০১৭১৪-০০৭৪৯২,  
০১৭১৭-০২৪৬৪৮

আবু সাহায্যঃ দুইনন্দন শায়ে দুলা ইসলাম  
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