

Dhaka Day by Day

'Paan Banaraswala"

by Raffat Binte Rashid

Looks are deceptive. Just a tray of spicy flavoured paans (betel leaf) on a stool, can hardly be described as a shop or a successful trade for that matter.

Yet Manik's makeshift look-alike paan shop at Dhaka Stadium, has earned a name of its own.

Manik has been in this trade for the last 23 years. Arab Ali, a Bihari vendor who owned the business before the liberation war was Manik's 'guru' (Master) as he describes.

"I was an apprentice of Arab Ali and the name of his shop was then Gazi Paan House. After he left the country I took over the business and with it the famous legend of stadium's misti paan (spicy betel leaf)", says Manik.

In fact, misti paans are so favourite that there are songs written about it. The famous Hindi song: "Khaye ke paan Banaras walla, khol jaye bandh akal ki tala," which when translated means that if you taste a small paan from Banaras, India, the rusted lock in your brains will open up.

Now this might sound as an exaggeration but believe it or not misti paans have strange effects on people. Manik bets that his paan is not at all inferior to its counterpart from Banaras.

"During the hot humid days of summer, my one piece of assorted misti paan cooled on ice, is bound to open any locks, even to the hearts," boasts Manik laughing.

Manik uses a lot as spice, flavours and scents in his paan. Supari (betel nut), scents, which he makes himself with sugar, sauce, a kind of flavour, elachi (cinnamon), coconut colouring, and their tabak a silver foil to finally wrap the paan for a pretty look.

These are only few items he uses in his everyday pieces. "Price depends on the amount of masalas I use. One piece might cost you Tk 10, if I use 20 kinds of masala," he explains. But usually he sells one piece for Tk 1 and has a profit of 20 paisa on each.

The paans he use are of a special kind, not the usual ones available in the bazaars.

He uses sanchi, a natural flavoured leaf. These leaves are exported to Pakistan and a bira (80 pieces) costs Tk 10 to Tk 20. These paans are specially grown in Khustia.

"This is the season when any paans are very much in demands, because this is the time for marriages, picnics, meena bazaars, en-

gagements and so many other occasions," he says. "Every day I have at least three to four orders to meet," he continues. A maximum of 3000 pieces to minimum number of 50 pieces are almost ordered every day now.

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Manik has two sons only. His eldest is an SSC candidate this year. His family lives in Pabna. He says that his son would not take up his profession; rather be what he wants to be.

He had no opponents all these times but lately two of his previous apprentices have set up shops of their own, and has permanent orders of Suhag and Officer's Club. But no one could master the trade properly, he feels.

Betel nut or leaf chewing has a long history and is favoured by many.

Infact betel also called areca nut, is a fruit used in combination for chewing or masticatory purposes throughout wide areas of Southern Asia and the East Indies. Betel chewing is a habit of an estimated one-tenth of the world's population. The betel nut is the seed of the areca or betel palm.

The areca palm, cultivated in India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Malaysia and Philippines, has a slender, unbranched trunk reaching about 12 or 15m high and

about 45 cm in circumference and is topped by a crown of six to nine very large, spreading, pinnate fronds. For chewing, a small piece of the areca's palm's fruit is wrapped in a leaf of the betel pepper, along with a pellet of shell lime or chumam to cause salivation and release the stimulating alkaloids. Chewing results in a copious flow of brick-red saliva, which may temporarily dye the mouth, lips and gums orange brown.

It's a habit mostly of the old people, but spicy and flavoured leaves or nuts are sometimes preferred by younger people too. Manik proudly sitting on the stool says "If you happen to be in stadium, look for Manik's shop and every one will point it to you. If you taste my paan once, I am sure you'll come again.

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