Bhabi will have started, unasked, to sort the various ingredients onto plates, chopping and washing the onions, garlic and chillies in preparation – so it looks like a TV cooking show set before your arrival. She will have the clay oven fired.

Step 4: There will be introductions with Shohidur's older brother Md. Mizanur Rahman Bipul and of course, with Bhabi. In due course you will be shown to the kitchen.

Step 5: Next, take the dried jute leaves and mix in water, slightly crushing them in the process. While doing this, Shohidur will explain how the jute leaves are harvested when the plants are young, no taller than his nephew. It is the new leaves which are chosen – a process which does not destroy the jute plant. It continues to grow, to provide the golden fibre. The harvested jute leaves are subsequently dried in the sun for 2 – 3 days.

Step 5: Put the washed jute leaves into a pan, adding the fresh puti fish.

Step 6: Add the onions, garlic and chillies followed by salt, turmeric, water and oil. Lightly mix by hand, and please note that one can be actively involved in this process. All the work need not be left up to Bhabi.

Step 7: Place on village stove to cook for fifteen to twenty minutes. While Bhabi lightly turns the torkari as it cooks, Bipul Bhai will bring the conversation to a boil concerning that other Kurigram delicacy, *shidal* – a dish made from *shutki*, which is dried, emaciated and shrivelled fish and *kochu pata*, or aram leaves.

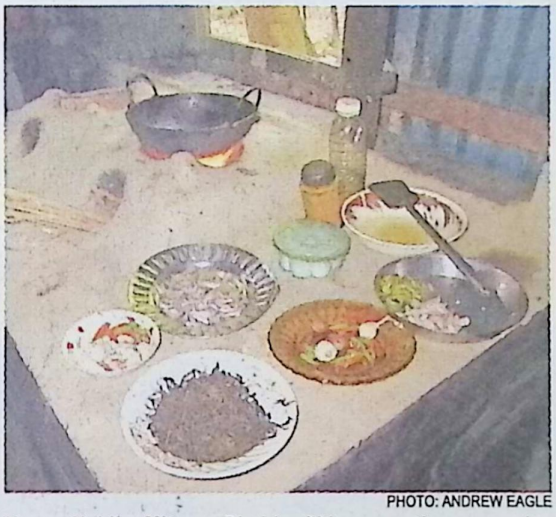


PHOTO: ANDREW EAGLE

Umma Habiba Mitu, or Bhabi, will have neatly arranged all the shutkani torkari ingredients in advance, so the kitchen looks like a TV cooking show set.

The process for making shidal is first to dry the puti fish for seven days in the sun – the usual shutki method. Then the shutki is mixed into balls with kochu and returned to sun-dry for another 15 – 20 days. The brownish, uninviting, disc-shaped and very smelly shidal ball is then ready for use. It's a strange kind of treasure.

Bipul Bhai will explain that when visitors from Ulipur town reach the villages they often desperately seek out shidal; while visitors from Dhaka tend to react with surprise and curiosity, asking "What on Earth are you eating?"

Step 8: While this is going on, Shohidur Bhai will be visiting the neighbours. He has already decided that any experience of Kurigram cuisine cannot be complete without at least seeing a shidal ball – as good as the shutkani torkari promises to be. As they had none in the house, the obliging neighbours will have agreed to provide one – and Bhabi meanwhile will metamorphose this plan into actually cooking the shidal, to make more precisely a shidal *bhorta* – a mashed shidal dish.

Step 9: By this time the steaming shutkani torkari will be served, usually with rice. It has a strong flavour, with a spinach-like consistency but slight bitterness to it – with just a hint of puti fish. Shutkani torkari leaves a lasting taste in the mouth which makes one want more. Even for a novice who's not particularly fond of fish – shutkani torkari à la Bhabi is delicious.

Step 10: Meanwhile the shidal disc will have arrived. Its odour is worse than a three-day old shirt and certainly no non-local would ever consider putting that in their mouths. Yet, the Kurigramers know better – that when cooked it will have a spicy, fulsome flavour.

Somehow before the eating of the shutkani torkari is completed, Bhabi will have miraculously fried the shidal with onions and chilli before it is mashed into a bhorta with mortar and pestle. It's spicier than the torkari, saltier with a stronger, unique flavour that, while tasty at first, must be as coffee – a flavour type which only brings increased enjoyment with accustom. It's not difficult to understand why Ulipur townspeople feverishly seek it out. Next time I will too.

Another dish associated with Kurigram District is *pelka*, a seasonal soup traditionally available at winter's end made from jute leaves and soda, or with *shozna* leaves in other seasons. But word from the Al Shad crowd is that pelka has resigned itself to history and is rarely enjoyed in Ulipur nowadays.

Step 11: Returning to town, Shohidur Bhai will stop beside a four-hundred-year-old village mazar, an Islamic shrine which sits not fifty metres from a likewise old Hindu temple, now within the roots of a huge tree. He wishes to demonstrate something of which he is proud: in Dhamsreni Union as in Ulipur, people of different faiths live in harmony.

Step 12: Upon reaching College Road, you'll find half the street talking about the project: to sample Ulipur cuisine. The experience will need to be discussed at length with the crowd at the Al Shad over a cup or three of tea.

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