

Paan-Supari has elevated a centuries old tradition to a new height.

PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS

Paan Rediscovered

AMITAVA KAR

An entrepreneur reintroduces a traditional treat to the urban population

On a stroll through the busy streets of Dhaka, Shawkat Ali, 27, keeps gesturing at the ground with disgust. He stops on the sidewalks in front of a restaurant, pointing out stains that look like dried blood.

These are the marks of betel leaves, consumed mostly in South and South-east Asia as betel quid or *paan*. To the chagrin of pedestrians, some *paan* eaters spit half-chewed betel leaves and saliva onto the sidewalks leaving reddish-brown splotches.

But not if the *paan* is from *Paan-Supari*, an unusual *paan* shop that has four branches in Dhaka. "We sell the *Shanchi paan* from Maheshkhali, Cox's Bazar. It's tiny, sweet and delicious. And it does not produce the reddish saliva," says Taslima Akhter who has been working here for four years. On most days, she works at the Banani branch, selling 16 different varieties of *paan* made from 180 different kinds of spices and ingredients most of which are imported from India. Other branches are located in the food court of Bashundhara City Mall, Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport and Dhanmondi-4 which was established in 2003.

Paan is part of life in this country. In rural areas, when guests come to visit, the host serves them *paan*, usually on a brass plate to welcome them and show respect. In Muslim weddings it is an integral part of *paan-chini* or engagement where the groom's family brings betel leaves and spices on a decorated tray. For ages it has been used as herbal medicine in the subcontinent.

At prices ranging from Tk 20 to Tk 170, the *paan* of *Paan-Supari* has become a popular after-dinner treat. It is made by folding dried fruits, nuts and pastes into a betel leaf, a member of the pepper family. Most people like it with candy-coated fennel seeds and rose petal preserves, chomping on it to freshen their breath or swallowing it to help digestion.



Although their main item is *paan*, they have a line of other products like *Borhani* (spicy yogurt drink) made from green mangoes and *Paan Masala* mouth freshener. The pieces de resistance are *Paan Benarasi* and *Paan Hyderabadi*, says Akhter. "We even have *paan* for diabetic patients."

Shawkat Ali has been a denizen of the shop ever since he went to the branch on Dhanmondi-4 in 2012 with his fiancée, Ayesha Siddiqua, now his wife. They always go for the "*Jamai-bou*" that is sweet and has cherry in it.