

"I don't remember when I began fishing. As long as my memory serves, I am always catching something or the other for the family. Fish is easily available," he says.

Geography and climate have made him and millions of others Mechho Bangali by fate.

Mechho Bangali by choice

It is destiny, working through geographical and climatic conditions, that has made us Mechho Bangali. But destiny did not entirely force it upon us: we love eating fish! Numerous Bengalis have made it a part of their diet and lifestyle willingly.

Nur Mohammad, a lecturer of a university who resides in Dhanmondi, is one such fish fanatic. He sometimes leaves the house at about three in the morning to go to Mawa Ghat, a place outside the capital city. The reason behind his odd comings and goings? Fish!

"Mawa Ghat is located on the banks of the Padma. The fish market there has fresh supplies from the river, including hilsa, which is my personal favourite. I reach there by sunrise to buy fish," he informs.

The hilsa is a matter of fascination. Famed recipes like 'ilish polau' and 'shorshey ilish' -- with their enticing smell and taste - have captured a special place in every Bengali's heart.

Nur Mohammed also goes to the wholesale market of Karwan Bazaar at dawn. "The place is buzzing with people. Fish are even put on auction, and other than retailers, there are general people like me who go there," he adds.

Mechho Bangali by tradition

The love and fascination has seeped through our culture and social norms. So much so that even the rare, peculiar fellow who doesn't enjoy fish also succumbs to being a Mechho Bangali once in a while, as many rituals and rites include fish.

Niaz Zaman wrote in her book, Boshha Bhat to

Biryani: The Legacy of Bangladeshi Cuisine, about a ritual in a Bengali wedding ceremony that involves carp. "A large rui or a pair of rui, occasionally decorated as bride and groom are sent with sweet yoghurt to the bride's house on the day of the gaye holud.



Traditionally, some money is put inside the mouth of the fish for the person who will cut the fish."

Meanwhile, Shawkat Osman wrote in his book about the usage of the term 'machher bazaar'. "When a large number of people congregate in any unlikely place, we call it a 'machher bazaar' (a fish market), illuminating the fact that fish markets are indeed the most popular and noisy place in the country."

There is no escaping from the 'influence' of fish.



Even if you do not eat fish at all, it is still likely you are a Mechho Bangali -- at least by tradition.

Mechho Bangali by acquired taste

Granted, for many people, the flavour of fish may not feel very enticing at first. It might take a little time.

As a child, I confess, I was not a big fan of it. But my mother challenged me to the intricate task of separating the bones from the fish ('maach bachha', that is). "You will become good at math," she promised. Was it because of the nutritional value or that the task required some patience and focus?

Not just mathematics, fish also made appearances in our junior literature books. We all memorised a famous poem, an excerpt of which goes: "... Panta ami chai

Watch Shawkat Osman talk about the Mechho Bangali in all of us



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na/Puti maach pai na/Ekta jodi pai/Omni Dhore Ghapush ghupush khai"

Meanwhile, children and even many adults fear the Mechho Bhoot: a ghostly spirit fond of fish, which often tampers in the kitchen, stealing or haunting fishermen for their catch.

With so much madness, stories, theories and (of course) fish around us, every Bengali's palate, sooner or later, becomes acceptable to it. Eventually, many of those who don't like fish initially also fall in love with it at some point.

On the other hand, today, the Bengali palate is an evolved one. It has learned to enjoy a meal at posh eateries, with the menu serving fish and chips, fish steak, mussels, fried calamari and so on. What a journey from the conventional and long-established fish recipes! These are mere additions, though: we still love the classics. From the Mechho Bangali by fate to the modern Mechho Bangali, our love for fish continues strongly.

And to celebrate that love, we will bring our best to the table this Bengali New year. "Esho he Boishakh, esho esho."

By M H Haider

Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed

Food prepared by LS Desk

