

LS PICK

KANS GRASS

Her feeble steps sunk deep into the ground, moistened by the overnight shower. The soles of the feet reddened by the sun and the silver anklet now covered with mud, she felt irritated by the damp clay that penetrated through the gap of her toes.

Pooja stared amazed by the sight that lay in front of her. For as far as her eyes could see, there stood the weed, standing tall on the ground, swaying with the brush of the breeze. It was like a sea of white – a dirty shade of silver, Pooja thought.

Hashu – the goat, which she carried everywhere her ten year old feet could take, grew anxious and jumped from her lap, hopped on the ground and leaving a trail by its hoof, disappeared into the lush growth of

Stories in Shankhari bazaar

Early morning in Shankhari Bazaar imparts a sense of calm, mingled with a hint of festivity, in every visitor. The narrow lane paving way to the narrower 'goli' of Shankhari Bazaar, a 400 year-old neighbourhood, is lined with jewellery stores casting a golden-yellow hue from the gold ornaments showcased inside the glass windows.

The sky line is a cobweb of hanging wires and the streets start getting busy at the crack of dawn. Nestled in the heart of the old town, Shankhari Bazaar was named after the Shankhari community,

shankha which is used as a trumpet, while the jal-shankha is used to offer holy water to the deities and for other decorative ornaments.

The shankha holds a special place in a married Hindu woman's heart. She usually receives it from the elder females of the house-hold during the wee hours of the morning on the day of her wedding. This is one of the first symbols signalling the start of a new life for her. They adorn this white conch shell bangle throughout their married life paired with a red bangle called the pola—generally a gift from the in-laws.

Shankhas are intricately designed using a thin metal file to carve patterns symbolising the love and respect for nature showcasing flowers, leaves, peacocks, elephants and various other designs drawn from the stories featured in the Hindu scripture such as the Ramayan and Geeta.

The shankha craftsmen detail out faces and bodies of Hindu gods and goddesses over the shankha as well. Shankhas these days are also lined with gold or silver, which is a more expensive variant of the traditional piece. Prices for the bangles start around Tk500 and above, depending on the detailed work.

Shankhari Bazaar is a place of charm and magic, old building dating from the Mughal era or even earlier lines the streets with sweet shops showcasing laddus and various mishti adding to the charm. Coupled with that, the heady smell of flowers, dhooop and incense hangs on the streets and the sound of dhol during puja catapults you to a different time.

Sadly, the community christened after the Shankharis, who settled in this part of the city hundreds of years back, is in a struggle to hold on to a tradition handed down by their forefathers as times change. Some artisans continue to fight and showcase the culture and tradition that is captured in this beautiful artwork.

By Abida Rahman Chowdhury
Photo: Collected

“Will it taste as sweet?” she pondered while white clouds hovered in the autumn sky.

Pooja stretched her hand to catch the weightless pulp of white flowers, the seeds that were blown into the wind for the species to propagate. Her father had told Pooja – kaash is a weed, a growth that takes the nutrients from the soil leaving it barren for time.

It grew in all directions and her father grew weary chopping them down. He could use them as fodder for the cow. That was all it was good for, Pooja's father told her youngest daughter.

Today, Pooja could vouch that her father was wrong. How can something so beautiful be a weed, an unwarranted growth that did no one any good? She stretched by hands



and held a stem. Sturdy to her touch the sharp bristles brushed against her soft palms.

She moved her hands. “Hashuuuu”, a cry that now seemed like

desperation. “Hashu, I will leave you alone here. HASHU!”

She considered penetrating deep into the grass but thought otherwise, lest she cuts herself. After a few more cries and calls, Hashu reemerged from the plush green, jumped and leaped, and came running to Pooja.

As they walked back to the village, Pooja took one final look. This was not the first time she had seen kaash, but never before did she realise that something so beautiful can exist. She looked into the white cloud that moved across a blue sky and then lowered her gaze onto the kaash that was moving like foamy waves in a turbulent sea.

By Mannan Mashhur Zarif
Photo: LS Archive

the kans grass.

“Hashu” she cried out loud. Her voice muffled by the gutsy blow of the southern wind. The goat reappeared, amidst the dense green, only to reassure of his presence and then off it went, jumping deep into the jungle, only the tinkle of the bells around his neck left a sign for Pooja to follow.

From the distance, the kaash seemed like a stretch of white carpet. The dense aggregate of the long kans' stem, topped with a snowy blossom, seemed shorter, but as she came closer the stem of the grass, Pooja realised, stood twice her height. She felt the blooms were silky, like cotton candy she saw at the village fair.

which derives its name from the ornate, hand-crafted, conch shell bangles (shankhas) they produce.

The shankha craftsmen have been around since the pre-Mughal times, if not earlier, and this part of the town has the highest number of Hindus in Dhaka city. Their craft fights to stand the test of time and passionate craftsmen still hold on to the age old tradition of hand carving the shankha (conch shell bangle) from scratch creating intricate designs on the bangles.

It is a labour of love and shankhas are vital elements used during the pujas by Hindus. Along with the Shankha, the white shell bangle, which is worn as a symbol of marriage, there is vadya