



MUSINGS

THE BIG-FAT-GRAND PICNIC

A Hollywood picnic is simple: a park, the leading-lady in a cute sundress, a picnic basket, and the youth in love.

What does a Bangladeshi picnic have? Well, all of the above and much more of course!

The heat and the humidity in this part of the world ensure that we cannot even think of a day out in the sun anytime except winter. Then again, this winter seems to always come later than expected, so we often make do with tolerably cool days of autumn. But have no fear, we will have our annual picnic and it shall be legendary. Just get ready with your favourite relatives (and some of the not-so-favourite ones), sit tight, and go!

Planning for a Bangladeshi picnic starts with choosing a place that is guaranteed to take us far away from our mundane lives, quickly. So, we need a picnic spot near Dhaka promising lots of shade and family fun.

Speaking of family - everyone is invited. Your aunt has a cousin whose niece just got married? New additions in the family must be specifically called and welcomed with the entire family on their side.

Now, we do not mean to bash this tradition of having everyone in it. Extended families are blessings for any picnic. If you want a love story to be brewing, you need people who are far enough in the family tree for it to be 'not-weird'. Even if this strategy of having a few eligible bachelors does not bring the intended sweetness of love,



you can always depend on the long married lovers. We will have more on that later for now we need to transport this huge group safely to the rendezvous.

As they say, the journey is the reward. Make it even more rewarding with loud-speakers blasting 90s Bollywood hits making everything a little filmy. The newly married bride with her abundance of jewellery will be providing necessary sparkles for the mood. However, aunties are by no means behind in dazzling. The elaborate saris, the girlish makeup, the long earrings, and at least one 'jorowa' set will show that they are still the best dressed in jewels in the entire family.

This glamour, with a busload of prattling, arrives at the spot and is in for a surprise. As if by a twisted joke of the advertisers, the 'shaded haven' proves itself to not be literally true, and sometimes just that and nothing more. For family 'fun', you have two sets of swings and for shade, three coconut trees.

Not to be too harsh on the space, there are a few flower plants and lots of free space. So, when the children start running around and it seems that there will be a moment of peace, old romances bubble up in the shape of a fresh marigold behind the ear of an ancient beauty, sneakily placed by familiar 'relic' hands. Cherish this moment because you have exactly five seconds before the children are at each other's throats and its lunchtime.



Picnic lunches in the times of Tagore used to be 'khichuri' and 'begun bhaja' with fish fry. A special 'chatni' in the end would be enough to make everyone's day. Now, even though recent history shows no new Mughal invasions, biryani has become a staple. So much so that the absence of it may lead to mutiny in the picnic party. The whole grisly affair of the lunch consists of packaged biryani with chicken or mutton gravy and fish fry because old Bengali habits die harder.

Let's get past the grisly details of the biryani and to the talent hunt. You will discover that everyone's a singer equipped with the knowledge of the first two lines of every famous folk song. A bit before you are convinced that the afternoon is only meant for such torturous exertions, here comes the raffle draw.

This raffle draw is the only thing that makes it all bearable. There is a stack of random household items intended to be prizes and you are excited because your name might be called any moment now. Of all the possibilities, you get a sandwich maker for the umpteenth time and you are hopeful that it will be just be as useless as the previous one.

You still are somewhat happy and on the way back, you give the fake assurance (which will turn out to be totally true) that you will have the same picnic next year.

By Afsin Ahmed

Photo: LS Archive/Sazzad Ibne Sayed