

Hajari gur, a fading tradition

SHYKH SERAJ
Locals say English Queen Elizabeth had given the name, 'Hajari'.

They say tigers shiver in the cold of Magh (Bangla month). Now it's Falgun time. When I'm writing this I'm feeling pretty much summer all around and the heat is in the environment. We're facing the extremity of climate change, no doubt. Farming and environment are facing a tough challenge. Winter is nowhere now even in the remotest region of Bangladesh. It's a three-week-old story that I'm going to tell the readers.

I went to Manikganj for filming and found the foggy weather and a little bit of cold. The villagers of Shikderpara in Harirampur's Jhitka were still at their beds. It was 5:30 in the morning. An ambience of silence was prevailing all over the croplands of Shikderpara. However, in this very early dawn, I met some people. We call them *gachhi*, tree climbers. These are the very first people of the village who woke up and went to collect date juice. Their wives are at home, preparing the stoves and doing household works. The earthen stoves are very special. There are four stoves at one earthen structure where date juice gets boiled (locally these are known as *bain*).

People can tap date juice from different regions of Bangladesh but Shikderpara's date juice and *gur* (molasses) has a very unique tradition and heritage. The molasses they produce is called Hajari *gur* and it's been the tradition for the local farmers for two hundred years or more. They make it from the date juice. However, the people who were involved with making this very special *gur* have mostly left the profession, only a few are holding on to the glorious tradition.

I was walking in the early dawn through the pastoral path of Shikderpara village in search of *gachhis*. The first *gachhi* I met is Zahid Hajari. He went on top of ten date palm trees with great efficiency and came down with juice in his pots.

"How long have you been doing this Zahid?" I asked.
"It's been three decades that I climb up and down," replied Zahid Hajari.

The fog was then fading away and I could see the sun coming through the eastern sky. As the day was opening, people were getting busy with the collected juice at their home for boiling them following the age-old methods. I could also notice the men coming back to their home with the juice pots on their shoulders. Abdus Salam has been involved with this profession for forty years.

"How many pots of juice have you collected?" I asked Salam.

"Three from twenty date palm trees," he replied.
"That's not much. Why is this happening?" I asked him again.

"Probably the climate and weather is making this happen," he replied with some doubt in mind.

During my childhood I had seen collectors coming down from date trees with plenty of juice in their pots.

Let's come back to Hajari *gur* and its tradition. As you have already read, *gachhis* of Shikderpara have kept alive the 200-year-old tradition of Hajari *gur*. Some do it on big trays, not like the earthen stoves. These trays are called *tapal*. But, the Hajari is boiled well on the *bain* (earthen stoves), the locals say and that's the tradition. And, the *gur* that is produced from *bain* are the original Hajari. For its taste and quality, the fame of Hajari *gur* has spread across the world. I talked with Habiba Khatun, a villager, who was boiling juice on her home yard.

"The season is for just three months and I'm pretty happy with my earnings," she said.

"How many kgs of *gur* do you make every day?" I asked.

"7-8 kgs but the boiling takes time," she replied.

In this village people no longer plant date palm trees. They remain busy for three months with the old trees.

Dear readers, let's share an interesting history of Hajari *gur*. Locals say English Queen Elizabeth received it as a token of love and a piece of *gur* got broken on her hands into thousand pieces. She tasted this *gur*. Since then the *gur* came to be known as Hajari (from Bangla word *hajar*, meaning thousand). And, the families who have kept alive the tradition till date are known as Hajari families. But, not everyone of them are involved with this profession and that's why Hajari *gur* is becoming extinct with other significant Bangladeshi traditions.

I could get the beautiful smell around the village of the date juice. Let's share how the earthen stove works. They put the dry wood through one side and through the other the heat goes out. There are four stoves at one place. Raw juice is poured on one stove and it is transferred to other three, with spaces of time. And, thus gradually the juice becomes the very special Hajari.

Shamim Hajari shared a very exceptional and rare history. Hajari *gur* is the only one of the kind in Bangladesh which has a brass seal. I came to know Elizabeth sent from England the seal engraved with Hajari, after she was really satisfied with the taste.

"Many other people have faked the seal and making the fake Hajari *gur* and sending those to bazaar," complained Shamim.

The new generation of the Hajari family and others are not interested to keep the tradition alive. Their children don't want to do the hard work. Ramjan Ali says his children have already told him that they're not going to be with the Hajari tradition. Shamim Hajari demands for government support to boost up these private initiatives.

Later on, I went to Jhitka Bazar to see the market of Hajari *gur*. Strangely, it was tough to find the real Hajari *gur* at the market. Those were mostly fake, I could understand. The price of pure Hajari *gur* is Tk 800 per kg. But, most of the *gurs* in the market was selling for Tk 90 per kg. Although they look almost the same, but the fake ones are mixed with too much of sugar.

Dear readers, traditional Bangladeshi culture became enriched with taste, pleasure and love. Bangalis are incomparable in making food items from natural elements. It is wonderful that after everything, near Dhaka, in Manikganj's Jhitka, some families have still held onto the famous Hajari *gur* that has incredible taste and smell. This Hajari *gur* is related to Dhaka's history. I expect, to preserve the heritage, the government as well as private entrepreneurs will extend cooperation. The historical Hajari *gur* might come up as well in the District Branding Project of the government and most importantly we should not let a heritage of ours become extinct.



Shykh Seraj sees processing of traditional Hajari gur at Shikderpara village in Harirampur upazila of Manikganj. Inset, chunks of Hajari gur after its final preparation.

PHOTO: STAR

Shykh Seraj is a Media and Agriculture Development Activist. He is an Ashoka Fellow and recipient of Ekushey Padak, FAO A.H. Boerma Award and many other prestigious accolades. At Channel i, he is Director and Head of News. He is also Director and Host of the popular agro-documentary, "Hridoye Mati O Manush".



Locals take part in a prayer following inauguration of this bamboo bridge made through a community initiative over the Gangnoi river in Shibgnaj municipality of Bogra on February 4.

PHOTO: STAR

Community-made bridge brings relief

MAMUN-UR-RASHID with ANDREW EAGLE

Until recently, residents of Vuraghat and Chaulapara areas in Bogra's Shibganj municipality had to either take a boat or travel more than three kilometres by road to reach the villages on the far bank of the Gangnoi River. But on 4 February 2017 a new bridge was inaugurated. A structure of bamboo, it's not the most sophisticated bridge in the country, but it stands as a symbol of community spirit, a testament to what can be achieved by working

together. "Unfortunately, the municipality has no means to erect a concrete bridge at this time, due to a lack of funds," explains the Shibganj mayor Touhidur Rahman Manik. "For this reason our community undertook the project on a voluntary basis, in order to immediately alleviate the hardship of around 10,000 locals, including students, farmers and professionals, who need to cross the river on a regular basis." Under the mayor's leadership locals were mobilised, including youth and student organisation

and sporting club members, to construct the bridge between 30 January and 3 February this year. In Shibganj it seems, people know how to help themselves. According to municipal councillor and inhabitant of Vuraghat, Abu Sayeed, local people donated 300 bamboo poles, rope, nails and wood to build the 172-foot long bridge. Men and women, boys and girls worked voluntarily for the five days of its construction. Bangladesh Chhatra League members also took part. "We are proud of participating," says their

Shibganj president Rizzaqul Islam. "We are ready to undertake any kind of work in our area to help our community." "The new bridge means a lot to the people of at least eight villages," says one elderly local of Chaulapara, Akbar Ali. "It will save us a lot of time and allow us to transport our vegetables and other crops to the nearby Mohasthangarh vegetable market faster and much more easily." For several villages the bridge also improves access to the municipal and district towns.

AMAR EKUSHEY CONTEST School kids make 30 Shaheed Minars in Barisal slum

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Barisal

Over 200 school children in Rasulpur Char area of the city took part in a unique event, making 30 Shaheed Minars with bricks, wood and papers on the occasion of 'Ekushey February'. The artistic creations of the kids, mostly underprivileged ones, were exhibited at a competition jointly organised by Sishu Kishore Mela, Bigyan Andolon Mancha and Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal in the slum area on February 21.

This programme started three years ago and popularity of the contest is increasing day by day, said Reba Begum, one of the organisers.

Another organiser Manisha Chakraborty said around five thousand people live in the area, but most of them

are so poor that they cannot have any arrangement for entertainment. "We planned to inspire the kids in the slum area so they could feel patriotism in their hearts," she added. School kids Rakib, Sweety, Redwan, Zahid, Sadia and others said they had been working for the last two days to build a Shaheed Minar. Seventh grader Ayeasha Anny said, "With my sister I built a Shaheed Minar. My father helped me to set it up." Five-year-old Sadia said, "I feel very good after making a colourful Shaheed Minar." The school kids were inspired by organisers and the char area has now turned into a fair of Shaheed Minar, said a guardian. Prizes were later distributed among 10 winners in the competition.



One of the 30 artistic Shaheed Minars made by school kids in Rasulpur Char area of Barisal city.

PHOTO: STAR