



# A playful affair

With the beginning of the Bangla New Year rural life comes alive with diverse cultural events

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### Lathikhela

The first day of the Bangla New Year is mostly when *lathikhela* (stick dance and fight) is organised in rural areas. Nowadays, *lathikhela* is also organised in urban areas. It's worth mentioning that *lathikhela* has different names in different regions. Based on style, it may take a variation of names in the same geographical location. These are the creative identities of rural Bangladeshi people. The districts of Kushtia, Jhenaidah, Jessore, Narail, Sirajganj, Panchagarh, Jaypurhat, Manikganj, Kishoreganj and Netrakona are famous for *lathikhela*. The sport has a unique feature in every different area. It is known as Sardar Bari in Manikganj area. At the beginning of the Bangla New Year, the people of this region organise *lathikhela* on *halkhata* festival. The event generally starts with the beats of metal plates and jars. In the midst of music, the Sardar Bari players get on the performance venue, and touch the sticks to show traditional respect. They then move around dancing keeping pace with the rhythm of the musical beats. Their choreographic performance reflects the gestures of harvesting paddy, weeding out the crop field, manual processing of paddy plants and spreading paddy for drying and so on. Afterwards one performer from the audience gets in and tells the dancers, "Vaisaabs, why do you dance only! The mothers and sisters are asking – you are not showing any work done by women!" One of the *lathials* then inquires, "What should we do then?" to which the answer is, "Show some works that are usually done by women, such as, grinding spices for cooking." Then the performers show how



Lathikhela in Manikganj.

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women process spices for cooking after which the war with *lathi* is performed. The fight of two sticks, four sticks, six sticks and eight sticks go on. The audience witnessing the combat gets a thrilling experience. Next, one *lathial* stands on the sticks placed on the shoulders of four support players and shows the skill of the moving *lathi*. In the areas of Kishoreganj, Kushtia, Jhenaidah and Sylhet, the *lathials* move following the rhythm of *dholok*.

### Potgaan

Various colourful fairs take place on Chaitra Sangkranti (ending celebration of Bangla year) and Bangla New Year in the rural locations. In Narail region, some performers go

from home to home to perform *potgaan*. *Potgaan* is a kind of performing art in the form of musical drama. Performers use their own paintings or some pieces of paintings on long folded canvases to perform *potgaan*. This performing art has an ancient history. Bramaboibarta Pura, articles of Patonjali, Bouddhya Jatak, Jaina Religious Book – Kalasutra and Fifth century plays 'Avijyan Shakuntala' and 'Malobikagnimitram' written by Kalidas mentioned these arts. The most surprising thing is that the 7th century book *Harshacharita* written by Banvatta describes, "Upon receiving the sad news of the King Pravakarbardhan being ill, Harshabardhan returned from hunting and on the way back he found, beside a shop, a *zamopattik* or *zampot* vendor showing his pot (canvas) to some boys. He held his pot hanging from a long stick with his left hand and with a jute stalk in his right hand was pointing to some pictures. There were pictures of the ferocious Mahishashur, Pretanatha Proddhan and some other mythical figures. The *zamopattik* was singing, 'Matapitri sahosrani putradwar shotani/Yuge yuge batitani kasso te kasso ba vaban!'"

The 8th century play *Mudra Rakkhash* written by Bishakha Dutt has a similar scene of Pot Exhibition as that of *Zamopattika's* pot. The pictures of Dharmaraj Zam and of punishment of the sinners were presented through *potgaan* to deter people from committing sinful and unethical acts. Thus the pot artists took the role of social reformer or social teacher. This is why *potgaan* got immense popularity in some areas. At present, the performances of *potgaan* still carry the tradition in the districts of Bikrampur

(Munshiganj), Narail, Jessore and Khulna. However, Arun Kumar Das, a *potgaan* artist of Narail district said that in their region, *potgaan* performance is mostly organised on the occasion of Chaitra Sankranti. They are not painters but they use the paintings of spiritual artist Nikhil Chandra Das. Binay Krisna Biswash and Arun Kumar Das perform *potgaan* on the basis of diverse rural life and folk stories. Moreover, in Munshiganj district, Mangol Mia and his group perform *potgaan* on the basis of Gaajir Pot-paintings painted by Shamvu Acharya.

### Buira-Buri Shong

The ritual of *halkhata* takes place on the Bangla New Year. Small businessmen of rural Bangladesh organise *halkhata* to motivate customers to pay off their dues. The business proprietors entertain their customers with sweetmeats. They also organise rural sports, folk drama, funny performances to create a festive environment. In Satura region of Manikganj district, there is an arrangement of *buira-buri shong* (comedy performance of elderly characters) along with Sardar Bari or *lathikhela* on the occasion of *halkhata*. Local masks created by rural artisans of Manikganj are worn by the performers. It is evidence of the skill of rural artisans of this area and their ability to express perfect human gestures. The masks reflect the symptoms of aged faces as well as young faces. The problems an elderly man practising polygamy are depicted in the *buira-buri shong* performance.

The first wife (elderly) wants her husband to sleep in her bed but the second wife



Potgaan in Munshiganj.

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