

# CHRISTMAS

for

## Bengalis and expatriates



Alfred, a 20-something law student in Dhaka, spoke of Christmas to me, but it was not what I had expected to be associated with the festival—an expression of joy and merriment. Instead, he started off with a flicker of a smile, which turned into a frown. He shared with me a little poem that he had written about Christmas—

*“Christmas is a little island  
In the middle of nowhere  
A tiny candle as opposed to an infernal flame in other places.  
And yet,  
Even though my feet have not sounded their existence in the House of God,  
The warmth that I feel is an exquisite and peaceful Spiritual sort  
It still lets me know, that I have my soul amidst the sounds of cash machines and number crunching  
Amidst the rumblings and grumbings of greed and discontent.*

*That is Christmas for me in Dhaka.”*

For Alfred, Christmas was not about his faith, something that is a huge part of what Christmas represents and symbolises for those who believe, it was more about the shared feeling of union and togetherness that the people in the city often forget about amidst their hectic lives, it was about his spirituality and his experiences with the people in his life whom he loved dearly.

He celebrates Christmas with his family, the usual decoration of the house, lighting up all sorts of decorative lights and hanging up tinsel and paper streamers around the walls that make up his residence in Dhaka, and of course feasting on delicious, rich food cooked with care and love and a lot of planning during the entire month of December.

Yet, what he writes about Christmas in his poem, something which resonates deeply.

Every year, we see the city dress up to welcome the many traditions and rituals that come along with the various occasions of religious festivities, be it Eid or Durga Puja or other celebrations such as that of Baishakh, considered by many as a more secular celebration. This appearance is not restricted to the tangible world either as we are flooded with numerous photographs and captions such as #DurgaPuja2017, #EidDay1, or even #Noboborsho, highlighting the festivities, on our many social media outlets. There was a daunting absence of the very look of Christmas as we, or I, have been brought up to expect, not the snowy treetops per se but the Christmas trees or even just regular native trees, decorated and lit up in the streets and in various stores and restaurants, in Dhaka, and this I realised I had only ever seen on screen when watching Christmas movies.

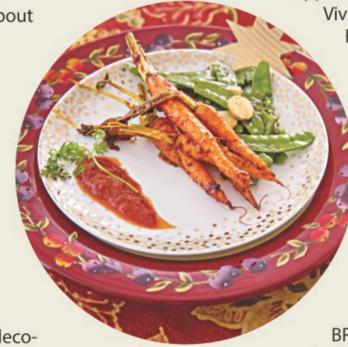
On top of that, there is the silence, precisely that there is no shift in the mood in the air or people rushing to stores to buy gifts and presents, and the music does not become a repetition of Christmas

jingles and carols, as one could expect it to. Dhaka remains almost barren on Christmas, possibly a reflection of the status of the Christian population being such a small segment of our hefty urban numbers.

Yet, I cannot deny that every Christmas, I do wake up to Bangla Carols, on account of my father having the TV turned to the morning news, which never misses the announcement of a special day, and the 25th of December is observed as the Boro Din, with news clips showing celebrations in Bangladesh that do happen all around the country, from small villages to the church masses in the city, and sometimes even a sighting of our very own Santa Claus, ironically in a hotel lobby, where a Christmas party is being hosted.

### CHRISTMAS MELODIES AND MALADIES

Besides these small signs of Christmas, there are some very specific places where the Dhaka-centric Bengali Christian urban middle class to upper-class visit during this season.



Vividly present in the Gulshan and Banani stores, which cater to Christian sensibilities around winter for the large population of foreign residents and visitors who tend to live in the vicinity of these areas, are those who shop for various colourful trinkets and decorations for their Christmas celebrations, which begin early in the month.

Turzo Nicholas, a BRAC University alumnus, currently studying at the Nalanda University in Bangladesh, shares with a chuckle, that he could tell just by looking at what people were buying around this time of the year if they belonged to a Christian family.

Besides these popular spots for Christmas shopping, people also visit New Market, where the concentration of diverse choices is at its peak. Many of those in the families who are bestowed with the responsibilities of executing elaborate menus and whipping up show-stopping cakes and juicy glazed roasts for the extravagant dinner tables set for Christmas, tend to visit the spice shops and dinnerware and cutlery stores at New Market.

Even the delectable Christmas cake will find one of its absolutely essential ingredients right there — the dried fruits that bejewel the special cake.

Yet, for many, the spirit of festivity and indeed the delight of the holiday season is amiss in the bustling cosmopolitan.

Lawrence, an undergraduate student brought up in Dhaka, finds himself frustrated to the point that he scowls as he tells me about Christmas. Wondering whether his sentiments are similar to those shared by Alfred, I encourage him to tell me why he would feel so frustrated about a day supposedly so full of festivities. He tells me that Christmas becomes just another way for a lot of people to flaunt their wealth and show-off. Lawrence says about Christmas, “It is more of a nuisance to me, and honestly, I dislike talking about it.”

While there is such strong resentment commonly present amongst Bangladeshi Christians, especially with the growing disillusionment, Dhaka does also have those who love the smell of fresh cookies being baked especially for Christmas, filling up not only the kitchen but wafting all the way down the street welcoming December and Christmas with warm hugs!

Janet, Lawrence’s cousin of the same age, jumps right into describing everything she and her family do throughout the month, and it almost seems as though her eyes had the twinkle from a Christmas tree lit up in front of her.

Christmas festivities begin early in the month, around the first Sunday, when teams of carollers go door to door in their compound, and sing multiple carols which range anywhere from a Bangla Kirtan to ‘Silent Night’ in either English or Bengali and this marks the beginning of the tradition of spreading the Christmas joy, brought on by their lively performances.

To carry this on, the whole family gets together to decorate the Christmas trees, an artificial one, and then the entire house is decked up for the parties, dawats (invitations) and the many guests.

All the parties start after the Mass though, which

h starts on the eve of Boro Din, or Christmas. Around 11PM at night, families and friends all gather at the church and pray till midnight, that is Christmas, and that is when they all sing along to a carol session that takes place right at the church.

“After the carol at the mass, we head back home, exchange greetings and party all night with friends and family,” shares Janet.

Christmas mornings begin early at Janet’s house with a few bands who will come to their street in the spirit of Christmas and play their instruments quite loudly. The morning calls for the distribution of cakes, sweets, fruits and pitha all over the neighbourhood. The Christmas cake, usually baked about 3-4 weeks preceding the Boro Din, is matured over time, with the cake being doused in some form of alcohol, generally rum or wine, every fortnight or so, allowing the flavours to develop and intensify while the cake retains moisture.

At times, to ease the process, the dried fruit that goes into the cake, is soaked in a jar of preferred alcohol during the month so that they soak up the flavour and moisten adequately until the cake is baked just before Christmas day.

Janet tells me that usually, they bake a cake at home, however, they sometimes opt for a store-bought cake owing to the hectic schedules of their lives.

The bakeries, however, offer a range of flavours and sizes and special cakes for Christmas, so it is an excellent alternative. She herself loves to bake and prepares a lot of cookies and pastries to entertain the guests.

The best thing, is that the celebrations go on till the New Year, when they go to the church at midnight to attend a mass, and then watch the fireworks and sky lanterns light up the foggy night.

**By Ayesha Rahman Chowdhury**  
**Photo: Shahrear Kabir Heemel**  
**Food styling: LS Desk**

SEE PAGE 18