

The clay that spoke of 'shokh'

Every Baishakh sees a spike in the sales of earthenware, particularly for 'shora' (convex earthen plates) and 'hari' (clay cooking bowls). As kumars (the potters) are busy with their pottery wheel and the kilns are burning day and night to compete with spiked seasonal demand; 25 miles north of Rajshahi City, the Pal Para (neighbourhood of potters) at Basantapur is busy with another unique clay creation along with their regular wares.

The "Shokher Hari" may seem like any other clay pot, but eye catching colouring and presentation makes it one of the most unforgettable earthenware.

Shokh is a Bangla word that directly transcribes into English as hobby, and rightly so as the meaning of amusement and happiness does not get lost in translation. The Shokher Hari is not the typical Hari (everyday cooking utensil). You can easily distinguish this from the others in the Baishakhi Mela or any other traditional fair as they are stacked three to seven (and even more) with jute cords in tasteful local style macramé. Rightly living up to its other name "Ranger Hari" (colourful pot), the bright yellow base adorned with motifs and pictures in red, blue, black and

white have made many children want the entire set!

This artful piece however has its position as a utensil for use on occasion. The Shokher Hari has been used on religious occasions as well as social events including Pujas, the two Eids plus as the carrier for sweets during weddings or



simply being presented as a tasteful piece of traditional décor. It should come of no surprise to see this hari being presented with gifts for a first-time mother. Adorned with motifs of flowers, trees, fruits, combs and mirrors, birds and

animals, the designs are all drawn from memory without any guiding or copying sample.

Hailing from Rajshahi, this charming craft has withstood the test of time. The name of Sushanta Kumar Pal is intrinsic when it comes to upholding the essence of the Shokher Hari. His and his family's expertise on this particular utilitarian art form is helping the Shokher Hari garner a position as an element of intangible cultural heritage of Bangladesh.

Pottery and clay craft is one of the key indicators of a civilisation and its society. In that context the Shokher Hari humbly offers its presence as a decorated utensil for occasions. It is not just another clay utensil with a creative pattern on it, if that were the case then just about anyone with a brush would be buying plain clay pots and painting them.

When a potter's hand makes way for the creative eye then it truly becomes the Shokher Hari, which stands as a 'shokh' for both the maker and also for the one whose home it will grace.

By Iris Farina
Photo: Collected

Dialect diversities

The diversity that lies within Bangladesh can be witnessed through the many dialects of the same but very different Bengali spoken in the different regions. It is also a surprise that people from one region do not understand the dialects of people from another region because of the heavy accents, despite the relatively small size of the country.

It is still debated whether some of these dialects may become individual and official languages with separate alphabets. For instance, in Sylheti, there are many words that are so phonetically different from those that the rest are accustomed to. In fact, there are no proper alphabets in the Bengali script to use if the words are to be literally interpreted on paper.

Stories of people who have been to Chittagong and faced the quick and seemingly twisted tongues of the 'Chatgaiyaor' speakers come to life in conversations, full of laughter.

Coming from a Sylheti family and having spoken Sylheti all my life at home, when for the first time I had to direct my school-bus driver to our home, I said, "Khala gate o thaimmun" (Stop at the black gate). Everybody in the bus laughed at me for speaking funny.

Confused and embarrassed, I got off and went home. What I did not expect was the sheer number of requests the next day from my friends to hear just one or two lines spoken in Sylheti. The delight they experienced was surprising, to say the least, and I delivered to their requests, albeit slightly awkwardly. As I grew up, it became a permanent condition where my friends would become silent to hear me when my mother called and I unconsciously switched to Sylheti.

Over time, I find that the longer someone has been away from the core areas where these dialects are spoken, they do not practice it at home. The consequence is that over two or three generations, the children no longer know how to speak those dialects and lose touch with a significant part of their roots. The exercise of speaking in proper Bangla is taken in an attempt to make the children better speakers, in order that they are more accepted in the major cities.

The influences in accents and words that we use when speaking in our dialects have tied in with them the traces of history, through bloody wars and injustices, to victories and freedom, and so we must keep alive the variants that belong to us, altogether and yet separately.

The songs we sing, for example, carry a meaning which is brought about by the very words and accents, the feelings that lay in these cannot be captured in translations as has been true for the languages themselves.

The Rangupur-ian with the silent Rs and the Jessore-i with its extreme 'accuracies' while coming from opposite ends of the nation together with the variants from each division essentially make up the spoken language of Bangladesh and each adds to the language its own pleasant quirk.

By Ayesha Rahman Chowdhury

The wishlist for our heritage

For any sovereign country, people hold the identity of the place, as well as the many defining practices that build its fabric of culture and tradition. Yet, somewhere along the line, maybe simply with the passage of time, or due to the dark side of globalisation, many of the heritage defining aspects disappear or worse, become convoluted beyond acceptance. This is where intangible cultural heritage needs to solidify its position.

UNESCO has not stopped at defining cultural heritage at monuments and documented history, the intangible heritage "includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants."

As more and more countries are filing their intangible heritages, we too have a number of such elements that need a place on this ever-expanding list.

FOOD AND PREPARATIONS

Traditional Bakarkhani from Old Dhaka, Cham-cham from Porabari, Tangail, Rosh-malai from Comilla, as well as other local sweets can be introduced in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of

Humanity. All these food preparations have their own unique history are endemic to a specific region while being acknowledged across the country.

To keep things in perspective, French cuisine, Mediterranean diet, Ginger bread craft from Croatia are already included in the Representative List.

FOLK MUSIC

Baul song is already part of the list, but there are still more that can take place beside it. Bhatiali, Bhawaiya both can be considered as potential contenders to be included. Dhamail, the traditional marriage song of Sylhet, has its own position as essential regional culture. Bangladesh's folk music as a whole may occupy a place in the list.

Considering how Japan's many performance arts including Kabuki Theatre, traditional Ainu Dance and numerous others are part of the list, Bangladesh's folk music and performances should also be in the process of listing.

Currently Bangladesh has four Intangible Cultural Heritages on UNESCO's list— Baul song (2008), traditional art of Jamdani weaving (2013),

Mongol Shobhajatra (2016), traditional art of Shitol Pati weaving of Sylhet (2017). As of now, April 2018, Rickshaw and rickshaw painting in Dhaka is in the process of being included in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

But let us not forget that while pursuing high profile intangible heritage to be listed, we cannot look away from even the tiniest thing that makes us truly Bangladeshi. Also, this is not a race for which country has listed the most.

As this Baishakh approaches, let us all make a promise to ourselves to uphold all that truly makes us Bangladeshi while making us citizens of this beautiful blue planet.

By Iris Farina

For further reading, you can check out Ten Elements of The Intangible Cultural Heritage of Bangladesh published by Bangla Academy for an extended picture on the work being undertaken to list our potential heritages. Visit <https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists> for the all the intangible heritages listed so far.