

Deshi begins at home

Walking down the brick lane of the 200-year-old Panam Nagar had me in a fully nostalgic mood, my usual dreamy self reminiscing of the bygone glamour, and the grandeur of the lifestyles of traders and landlords. I visualised a beautiful dusky belle, her curly locks cascading down her slender back, waiting on the rooftop, on a quiet afternoon, for her beau. Or them slyly walking down the brick alley to some rendezvous; my romantic mind sails on so many tangents.

But romanticising the days of yore was not the only thing I had in mind; I was on the hunt for lost or nearly extinct traditional deshi toys and decoration pieces. I wanted a small part of that lost splendour in my flea market style interiors.

Sadly, nowadays, these lost village curios are referred to as crude trash, and have no room in our modern urbane interiors. Simple wall hangings with a typical village scenario, like boats or houses and coconuts trees that are so meticulously portrayed by slivers of bamboo shavings on a piece of black cloth background. Or those alluringly shaped round wooden dolls in sets of threes, with big black bouffant hairdos and red saris; unlike our favourite terracotta tepa putuls, they do not have the limbs. But even if you are a doll collector, these deshi cuties will rarely find themselves a place besides the Russian Matryoshka or Japanese traditional dolls.

It's difficult to fathom why anything deshi is referred to as crude and not stylish enough.

Tepa in Bengali means pressed, and these handmade terracotta gems are shaped and pressed by hand according to the potter's imagination, dried in the sun, and baked in kilns. Originally, they were never painted because they often symbolise prosperity, and are considered sacred. But now, artisans facing financial crises, have started selling these dolls painted in yellow, red, green, and black. These dolls depict a village woman's everyday lifestyle; with a kid on one arm, and a pitcher on the other, or while trying to put a child to sleep



while swinging it on her stretched out legs.

Our interiors reflect our temperament; we make bold statement choices according to our desires as to how we want to see our homes reflect us. An artistically compatible couple would choose their interior style together, or some would go along with a consultant's choices. But as explained earlier, one's own aesthetics take centre stage when it comes to interior decoration.

Our deshi toys and decoration items are solely for the ones who prefer flea market style interiors, and have a streak of bohemian nature in them.

The cane rickshaws, vans, gorur garis or ox carts, the dhols, and dug-dugi, or ektaras actually add their own rustic glamour to interiors, if placed or used properly. The chikhas or the shokher hari, their bright countrified charm needs to be appreciated, and then used correctly for interior decorations.

These make beautiful garden ornaments

or porch and foyer decoration items, adding a touch of deshi flavour to your interiors. However, if your décor is contemporary, and boasts crystals and leather lazy boy chairs, then these are not for you.

For these beautiful clay pots, colourfully painted in a mingling of yellow and white, red and blue, have recurrent motifs like fish, birds, water lilies and paddy. It is believed that the hari brings good luck to the family. Because of this belief, shokher hari has made its place in the Baishakhi celebration.

The rural people, with their rustic aesthetic sense, developed folk art in Bangladesh; taking inspirations from the environment and their agricultural activities, everyday household activities, or simply, the influences from the nature around them, the lotus, the sun, the tree-of-life, flowery creepers, and common motifs like fish, elephant, horse, peacock, circle, waves, temple, mosque etc. Another important factor that has influenced the art and culture of this land are the six seasons. These are seen in paintings, embroidery, weaving, carving, and engraving to develop the traditional folk-art or deshi toys of Bangladesh. Each of these motifs have special symbolical meanings for the artisans, for example, the fish represents fertility, the sheaf of paddy denotes prosperity, and the lotus as purity.

So, instead of a Turkish evil eye or Chinese lucky coins, we can hang our own deshi lucky charms. We can be deshi in a stunning trendy manner; it's all in our mind-set and how we see our interiors.

However, not all of us have to adapt the bohemian style of interior decoration, but we must remember to not use traditional folk art with contemporary interior styling. But we can cherish our lost grandeur or toys or folk art by appreciating all things deshi. This Boishakh, go to Sonargaon museum and enjoy a village fair and our local folk art. Shubho Noboborsho to all.

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Photo: Intisab Shahriyar



A village fair

As our lives move away from our rural agrarian roots, more and more traditions that were quintessential to the Bengali experience are slowly lost.

Some of these are left in the past where they belong, but some deserve the right to be nurtured, protected, and preserved for ourselves, and the generations that will only hear about a rural Bengal. A village fair or "grammo mela" is, I believe, one such piece of intangible heritage.

I have myself grown up in the city, and my contact with the rural society has been sporadic, and occasion-based, but nonetheless enjoyable.

The melas in the villages have a similar flavour, colourful, vibrant, crowded, and mostly charmingly simple, especially for eyes used to the hard-core glitz and glamour of the city, which can tend to be on the exhausting side.

A typical fair would be organised in a wide open space, with makeshift stalls, all brimming with merchandise that is mostly not of the useful kind, but things that bring inexplicable joy. The potters, with regular pans and pots, but also toy-versions of them; other stores with the little 'botis' and 'belun piri' and the wooden dhekis.

Women with their stalls full of glass bangles, and other little trinkets—the bead necklace, the golden anklets. Men and women selling snacks, from the more common 'fuchka' and 'jhal muri' to the less often seen 'khaja', 'kodma', 'batasha' and 'khoi'. Some have stalls with 'mishti'. The weavers bring their plethora of colourful 'ornas' and saris, both for adults and children, and of course, the neatly folded lungis and colourful gamchas. Bamboo and wicker baskets and trays, wooden decoration pieces and toys, all kinds of things imaginable, are on display for perusal and purchase! The craftsmen in the villages gear up productions ahead of such melas, typically for Eid, Pahela Boishakh and Saraswati Puja, and in Bengal, during Durga Puja too!

No village mela is complete nowadays without loud music playing from someone's humongous, but bad quality speakers, and of course, the corner with 'nagordola'—a rickety, small and loudly

