

FROM LONDON TO KANIHATI

ISHRATH CHOWDHURY

Years of overhearing my parents' conversations with relatives and aunts telling me "Ze sikhon oiso!" had led my naïve young brain to assume there was only one way to speak Bangla. Little did I know that once I'd arrive in Dhaka, at the tender age of 7 years old, there was a whole bunch of dialects for me to find out about.

Many (non-Sylheti) people usually associate Sylhet with the fancy tea resorts and hotels that are popping up left and right in the division, but my mind always brings forth the picture of one of three possible places -- our home, my *nana bari*, and a house in Moulvibazar.

The beauty and charm of Sylhet can be found at every turn and my mum always made it so that we'd get to experience as much of it as we could. Like many others, I've been captivated by the enchanting and tranquil views of "Madopkondo" and "Bisnalandi", collected curiously beautiful stones in Jaflong, became mesmerised by the sunlight peeking through the towering trees of Lawachara and, of course, ventured through the infinite evergreen shrubs of tea gardens.

However, hidden behind those hilly tea gardens and down one of the many twisty roads, is the enchanting kingdom



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

we call Kanihati. Now, I only say kingdom because (forgive the cheesiness) my parents always referred to my sisters and I as their "Kanihati Princesses", and my younger brother was later dubbed the little Prince. However, you can trust me when I say we certainly did not maintain the etiquette of royalty once the soles of our little shoes touched the ground after a 4-hour long car journey from Dhaka that had commenced at dawn.

Sylhet was always a blank page for my siblings and I to make new adventures and stories for ourselves. We could be anything we wanted -- warriors or pirates with our swords made of bamboo and rope, explorers in the jungle on an escapade to find some vague treasure with a very poorly-drawn (but definitely colourful) map, chefs making a spectacular and very filling meal of starfruit with salt and chilli powder, or even the proud

little builders of a house made up of mostly bamboo and banana tree leaves (which probably didn't follow any health or safety rules).

Then there was all the swimming, fishing, hours spent jumping around in mountains of hay, mud fights, walking our "pet" goats like we were the most refined little Parisian ladies with poodles instead, making fires and following about our almost-nannies Zee and Murgi Zee -- we call her that even to this day because of her very chicken-like mannerisms -- who would ask us "Kita koro re go, mai?" before going about their tasks and telling us how we should eat rice rather than "aloo siffs". A specific memory never fails to make me chuckle. The local kids following me around and shouting "laal saathi" because I always used to carry a small red parasol.

Looking back on those times, I had always felt like little Mary Lennox with my secret garden. And when I'm feeling homesick, the memories continue to comfort me. The last time I was there, it was nearly a year ago and in these difficult times, it's so uncertain when I'll be able to return to this place that I hold so close to my heart.

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Tale of Tea and Friday Addas

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Tea for us Sylhetis is more than just a cup of tea. It is a daily ritual. It is an emotion. The romance of Sylhetis and tea is eternal and hence Sylhet, having most of the fabled tea gardens of the country, is called "The Land of Two Leaves and a Bud".

There are 135 tea gardens sprawling in Sylhet district to give the nation its caffeine fix. Interestingly, if you are a local resident of Sylhet city, I am sure you have come across the infamous Bacchu Tea Stall on the Airport Road. When weekends arrive, it's hard to miss the prominent role that this tea stall plays in wiping away all the exhaustion and stress of our daily routine. A hot cup of tea with mouth-watering *piyajua* is a quintessential part of every Friday.

Most of the time, these *adda* sessions are a manifestation of rants, gossip, debates and rebuttals. There would be break-up stories, chats about shopping sprees, and political conversations. Last but not the least, to add the fundamental fuel to complement the sessions, there would be tea.

If you are yearning to take a walk in the hilly areas and sip on gallons of tea, you definitely need a trip to Sylhet. The Malnicherra Tea Garden in Sylhet was



PHOTO: SYED TALHA MUHTASIM

established in 1850. Four years after that, the first commercial tea production in the country started in these gardens.

Along with milk tea and black tea that both the young and old consume regularly, the seven layer tea is also very well known

in Sylhet. It is prepared in a special method so that it has seven different layers of seven different colours -- and seven different flavours. When served in a glass, the seven different layers remain separate and do not mix. If you ask the *tong er mama* how he

prepares the seven layer tea, he will hesitate to reveal it to you because the recipe is a trade secret of Sylhet. But I can tell you the main ingredients are condensed milk, cinnamon, cloves, green tea from Sreemangal and three types of black teas.

Tea blends into the lives of the Sylheti people as smoothly as the cloud kissing mountains blend into the winding rivers of Sylhet. Be it the cold winters or the hot summers, one thing that stays constant around the streets of Sylhet city is the consumption of *tong er cha*. Dipping in a piece of dry cake into the simmering hot cup of tea, exchanging stories with the afternoon light pouring in -- ah! The perfect *adda* session.

A cup of tea brings out emotions of happiness, pain, sadness or longing. So, the next time you are in Sylhet, don't forget to stop by for one of these *adda* sessions in Bacchu Tea Stall. Regardless of whether you decide to take an interest in the discussion or just wish to sip tea, it will be an incredible experience to cherish.

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