

#PERSPECTIVE

SWEET PITHAS, BITTER REALITIES: The women behind the delicacies //



When winter drapes itself over Dhaka, the city welcomes a familiar comfort: the scent of freshly made pithas wafting through the cool air. At street corners, markets, and bustling alleyways, women with warm baskets and weary eyes sell these sweet treasures — bhapa pitha, patishapta, chitai — each a delicate celebration of tradition.



We pause to savour their softness, but how often do we stop to ask about the hands that made them?

Tales of survival

Sufia Begum sets up her small stall every day near the Gulshan-Badda Link just as the sky hints at dawn. The chill clings to her, but her hands move with steady resolve.

“I wake up at 5 AM every day,” she says, her voice low but firm. “The cold doesn’t wait, and neither does hunger.”

For Sufia and countless other women in Dhaka, pitha-making is not a seasonal indulgence; it is a lifeline. After her husband’s illness drained their savings, she turned to the skills her mother had passed down to her — the quiet craft of turning simple ingredients into something that could warm both bodies and souls.

Yet, even as her pithas sell, she remains invisible, a shadow in the bustling city.

The art of pitha-making is as old as winter itself. Generations of women have passed down these recipes — a pinch of rice flour, a dash of jaggery, and a lifetime of patience. But tradition is no shield against the demands of survival.

For Jamila, a 35-year-old mother of three, every morning is a race against time and poverty. She sells her pithas near a crowded bus stand, competing with blaring horns and restless



crowds. “Some days, I sell everything. Other days, I bring half of it home,” she says, her eyes scanning the crowd. “But I can’t stop. If I stop, the rent stops. The food stops.”

The price of rice flour rises, firewood grows expensive, and the demands of city life press tighter. Yet, customers haggle over a few takas, unaware that they are bargaining over someone’s next meal.

Beyond their role as pitha-makers, these women juggle multiple responsibilities.

From caring for children to managing household chores, their lives are a constant balancing act. “My husband left years ago,” says Shahana, who sells pithas at Shahjadpur Jheel Par. “I had to find a way to feed my children. Making pithas gave me that chance, but it also means I’m always working — from dawn to midnight, seven days a week.”

The physical toll is evident in their calloused hands and weary faces. Yet, their determination shines through, driven by the hope of a better future for their families.

When tradition builds a future Pitha-making is more than a seasonal trade; it is a window into the resilience of women who refuse to give up. Some women are finding new ways to share their craft — through social media orders, local cooperatives, and community markets.

Shahana, who usually sells on street corners, now delivers her pithas to homes thanks to her eldest daughter.

“I didn’t know how to use Facebook at first,” laughs Shahana. “My daughter taught me. Now, many people message us for pithas. It feels good to be appreciated.”

As we enjoy the warmth of a freshly made pitha this winter, let us pause and appreciate the women who rise long before dawn and shape the dough and hope with the same hands — who fight invisibility with resilience.

The next time you taste a pitha, ask the name of the woman who made it. Look her in the eyes. See her. Because behind the sweetness, there is a world of courage that deserves to be known.

By Ayman Anika
Photo: Ayman Anika