

MY DHAKA

Glimpses of Dhaka's IFTAR HISTORY

RIDWAN AKRAM

Four centuries ago, the Muslim population of Dhaka was relatively small. However, the arrival of the Mughals precipitated a shift. These individuals brought their own culinary staff, ensuring the availability of familiar fare.

They would partake in various types of bread and kebabs. Naan-taftan, an almond-infused naan roti, was prevalent in the Mughal army camp in Dhaka. Another popular item was shirmal roti, introduced to Dhaka from Agra by Mughal subahdars.

During this period, shirmal was prepared with semolina. These rotis were likely staples of the iftar menu. During winter, Akbari Nankhatai was added to the selection, accompanied by diverse kebabs.

A notable kebab of the era was Parsand's sheek kebab, prepared with substantial portions of meat, later known as sutli kebab. Other varieties included mosallam kebab, shami kebab, handi kebab, tika kebab, tash kebab, and various fish kebabs.

Wealthy Muslims of the time partook in approximately 50 distinct dishes!

In 1639, Shah Shuja assumed the position of subahdar of Bengal. During his tenure, 300



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Shia families arrived in Dhaka, introducing one Khorasani polao. The Mughals also prepared a dish akin to modern-day haleem -- incorporating meat, spices, lemon juice, and wheat.

Beyond savoury dishes, sweet preparations were also popular during the Mughal era.

In the mid-19th century, preparations for Ramadan commenced after Shab-e-Barat. Water vessels were cleaned, and new surahis, clay hookahs, and other items were procured. These were brought home and scented with perfume.

During hot days, earthenware jugs were used to keep water cool, with rose and keora essences added for fragrance. At

that time, iftar was referred to as "roza kholai", signifying the breaking of the fast with food.

Preparations for iftar began in every household after zuhr prayer.

Women would proceed to the kitchen, where pre-soaked chickpeas and moong dal were prepared. Phuluri was made from the chopped dal, with efforts made to ensure it was served hot during iftar.

There were shorbotos mixed with Zamzam water. The shorbot menu included faluda, tokma shorbot, bel shorbot, pomegranate shorbot, and lemon and tamarind shorbot. Takhse Raihan was a popular variant of tokma shorbot.

After shorbot and dates, the

main iftar meal would begin, with individuals of all ages gathering at the dastarkhan. Various homemade muri dishes, sweet and savoury samosas, raw and fried dals, fruits, onions, and phuluri were procured from the market.

A sweet mixed food called "Golapi Ukhre" was also present, alongside roasted chira, dobhaja, tepihuluri, large mashkalai dal-boot, bakarkhani, and kebabs.

While diverse iftar preparations were made at home, residents of Old Dhaka consistently acquired items from Chawk Bazar. Both the affluent and the less privileged frequented the Chawk. Even in the early 20th century, the notion of iftar market in Dhaka exclusively referred to Chawk Bazar.

However, in the 1940s, the situation began to evolve, with temporary iftar stalls emerging in neighbourhoods due to increased demand.

Following the Partition of 1947, the growth of the middle class in Dhaka led to the incorporation of pitha-puli from rural Bengal into iftar.

After the independence of Bangladesh, the scale and diversity of Ramadan and iftar arrangements increased significantly.



Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus alongside family members of this year's Independence Award winners at the Osmani Memorial Auditorium in the capital yesterday.

PHOTO: PID

7 eminent individuals receive Independence Award 2025

UNB, Dhaka

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus yesterday conferred the Independence Award 2025 on seven individuals, recognising their glorious and outstanding contributions to the nation.

The chief adviser handed over the award at Osmani Memorial Auditorium.

Prof Jamal Nazrul Islam was given the award in science and technology category while Mir Abdus Shukur Al Mahmud (posthumously) in literature category, Novera Ahmed (posthumously) in culture, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed (posthumously) in social service, Mohammad Mahbubul Haque Khan alias Azam Khan (posthumously) in Liberation War and culture, Badruddin Mohammad Umar in education and research, and Abrar Fahad (posthumously) for his role as a young protester.

Interim government advisers, the chiefs of the army, navy, and air force, and senior government officials were present at the

ceremony conducted by Cabinet Secretary Sheikh Abdur Rashid.

Speaking at the function, Prof Yunus said, "The nation is proud today, but it is very painful that these people were not given this recognition when they were alive."

"We remember them today with gratitude," he said.

Nobel Laureate Yunus said the people of the country are delighted to honour them with this award despite it being late.

He said their works would inspire all.

The Independence Day Award or Swadhinata Padak, is the highest civilian award given by the government of Bangladesh.

Introduced in 1977, this award is bestowed upon Bangladeshi citizens or organisations in recognition of their substantial contributions to one of many fields, including the Liberation War, the Language Movement, education, literature, journalism, public service, science and technology, and medical science.

Free, fair polls between Dec and June 2026

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international community also wants Bangladesh to be free of corruption, as they want to invest here, he said.

The government is working to implement e-services and encourages citizens to send their suggestions on how the authorities can make online services simpler, he said.

During the AL regime, false cases were used as a weapon to suppress dissent, and the interim government has so far recommended withdrawal of 6,295 such cases.

In addition, 413 cases filed under the Cyber Security Act have been withdrawn. This law will be repealed, and a pro-people Cyber Protection Law is being formulated, he said.

The entire process of purchasing airline tickets has been moved online, leading to a reduction in ticket prices by 50 to 75 percent, he said, adding that this benefited expatriates in the middle east.

To make the experience of Hajj better, the interim government developed a mobile app to assist the pilgrims before, during, and after their journey, he said.

The government wants to uphold

the rights of women and minority communities, including those who live in the hill tracts, he said.

Referring to the atrocities committed by the autocratic regime, he said, "I want to assure you that those involved in mass murder, those who have indiscriminately killed people, and those already recognised as killers by the world will be brought to justice on this land."

Yunus also spoke extensively about Bangladesh's relations with different countries and the Rohingya crisis.

The UN is preparing to hold a separate session on the Rohingya crisis at the UN General Assembly in September. Malaysia and Finland have stepped forward as co-hosts of the event, he said.

Prof Yunus said former Australian acting prime minister Julie Bishop had agreed to play a key role at the session.

Countries around the world have spontaneously extended their hands of friendship towards the interim government. He said during his visit to the UN, Switzerland, and the United Arab Emirates, various heads of state, ministers, and global trade

leaders expressed sincere interest in supporting Bangladesh.

The UAE previously suspended visas to Bangladeshis. "They have assured us that they will complete all the formalities and open their doors soon."

Bangladesh expressed interest in joining ASEAN as a member. Malaysia has assumed the chairmanship of ASEAN, and the country's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has expressed his support regarding the matter, he said.

Malaysia is working sincerely to resolve all the problems related to hiring Bangladesh workers, he added.

Nepal and Bhutan are very eager to provide Bangladesh with hydroelectric power, he said. "If we can bring hydroelectric power from Nepal, our reliance on fossil fuels will decrease."

In light of the country's growing electricity demand, the government emphasises completing the construction of the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant on time. "The director-general of Rosatom has assured me that the power plant will soon begin trial runs."

Overcharging rampant ahead of Eid

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Mozammel Hoque Chowdhury, secretary general of Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, said they found that non-AC bus operators on northern routes were taking an extra Tk 300 to Tk 600, while AC buses were overcharging between Tk 500 and Tk 1,500.

"A similar situation was seen on most other routes, except for Dhaka-Chattogram and Dhaka-Sylhet," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

The Samity, a passengers' welfare platform, will hold a press conference today, demanding an end to the anarchy of overcharging and passenger harassment during the Eid rush, Mozammel added.

Thousands of people have already started leaving Dhaka to celebrate Eid with their loved ones, and the pressure of holidaymakers is expected from tomorrow evening as the nine-day public holiday begins on Friday.

Many travellers could manage to get advance tickets on high fares.

OVERCHARGING

Mujibur Rahman travelled from Sayedabad to Barguna's Betagi on a non-AC bus of Meghna Paribahan on March 10, paying Tk 550.

However, when he went to the bus counter on March 22 to purchase a ticket for the same route, he was shocked to find the fare had surged to Tk 1,000.

"This happens every Eid -- the bus fares shoot up, and we have no choice but to pay," Mujibur told this correspondent yesterday.

"When I asked the bus staffers about the sudden rise, they just shrugged and said the company fixed

the new rate. They claimed that they had no control over it," he added.

Similarly, three months ago, Abdul Ahad went to Satkhira's Shyamnagar from Dhaka on a non-AC bus of Emad Paribahan bus, paying Tk 650.

But when he visited the Sayedabad bus counter yesterday, he was asked to pay Tk 850 for the same trip, an increase of Tk 200.

"This is unfair! Why this sudden hike? They are simply taking advantage of passengers' demand," he said.

When asked about the fare increase, Khalilur Rahman, a staffer at Emad Paribahan counter, denied the allegation, saying, "The fare has always been the same."

Asif Uzzaman, who works for a firm, travelled to Cox's Bazar from the capital by an AC bus of Shyamoli NR Travels on March 18 paying Tk 1,700.

"But ahead of Eid, when I went to buy a return ticket from the same counter at Sayedabad, the counter staffers were asking for Tk 2,000! That's an increase of Tk 300 for no reason," he said.

Shakil Hossain said that he purchased a ticket at Tk 1,800 of an air conditioning Green Line Paribahan bus and made a trip to Cox's Bazar from Dhaka in the first week of December.

"But when I went to buy a ticket from the Arambagh counter today [Tuesday], its employees demanded Tk 2,000 for the same route," he said.

"This is robbery! When I questioned them, they just shrugged and said, 'Take it or leave it.' Is this how passengers should be treated? There's no authority to check this, no one to hold them accountable."

This newspaper could not reach

the owners of Green Line Paribahan, Shyamoli NR Travels and Al Hamra for comments.

A top transport leader, wishing not to be named, said they have nothing to do with AC buses as there is no fixed fare for such services.

As per the Road Transport Act-2018, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) is to determine fares for public transport following government permission.

But AC coaches and public transport with special amenities are not under its purview, according to section 34 (2) of the act.

However, the government or the BRTA could take steps to fix the fares if there are allegations of overpricing, says section 34 (2) of the law.

But the authorities never fixed the fare for AC buses.

"Taking advantage of the situation, bus operators fix the rate for normal time, but the situation deteriorates during the Eid rush," a BRTA official said, wishing anonymity.

BRTA Chairman Mohammed Yasin neither responded to our phone calls nor text messages.

A press release by the Road Transport and Highways Division yesterday said that mobile courts are conducting drives to prevent overcharging.

Contacted, Muhammad Fouzul Kabir Khan, adviser to the road transport and bridges ministry, said that they would take actions, including revoking registrations, if the allegations were found to be true.

"However, the complaints must be specific," he told The Daily Star last night.

A fearless freedom fighter of Old Dhaka

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roof-top of the Isha Brothers building in Bangshal with 8-10 of his associates, armed with a revolver and a double-barreled gun. He set up an ambush, waiting for the Pakistan forces, they said.

After midnight, Pakistani soldiers began torching the slums near the mosque at the Rai Saheb Bazar intersection. Then they moved on to set fire to the sawmills of Nayabazar. As soon as their jeeps came within Nader's ambush range, he and his companions opened fire, taking the enemy by surprise. Several Pakistani soldiers were killed in the sudden attack, they added.

However, as the Pakistani forces outnumbered them and were heavily armed, they quickly regained control. The soldiers retaliated with gunfire, but by then, Nader and his men had retreated. The next morning, on March 26, Nader took his family to safety in Manikganj, and returned to Malitola, ready for the next fight.

No one among Nader's fellow freedom fighters is alive today. Elderly locals said they heard about Nader's incredible bravery from his fellow freedom fighters when they were alive.

Abdul Majid, a resident of Basabari Lane in Tanti Bazar, is one of them.

"At that time, a Bihari named 'Sangram' supplied weapons to Nader's group in exchange for a hefty sum of money. Initially, Nader purchased weapons using his own and his gang members' savings. But as their funds ran out, he started collecting donations from residents of different neighborhoods to buy weapons to fight Pakistani soldiers," he said.

By mid-April, as "Shanti Committees" started forming in various neighborhoods of Dhaka, Nader and his comrades had to restrict their movements for safety.

Several senior residents from Old Dhaka said that towards the end of May, the local Shanti Committee in Armanitola decided to hold a meeting where Khwaja Khair Uddin, the convener of Dhaka's Shanti Committee, would be present.

Nader and his associates bought some weapons from Sangram and planned an attack on the meeting.

On the scheduled day and time, Nader and his gang members took position near the Armenian Church at Armanitola. However, Sangram and a notorious gangster from Malitola, known as Geda, had already informed the Pakistani army about Nader's plan.

To deceive Nader and his group, the Pakistan military arrived in Armanitola in several microbus instead of a military jeep. Before Nader and his group could react, the Pakistani soldiers in plain clothes surrounded them from three sides and launched an attack, locals said, citing Nader's fellow freedom fighters.

Nader and his comrades retaliated, but by then, it was too late -- the Pakistani soldiers had already surrounded them from all directions. Seeing this, Nader decided to retreat while firing back, along with his comrades. In the process, a bullet struck Nader's leg. By that time, most of his fellow freedom fighters had managed to reach safety.

"After being shot in the right leg, Nader crawled into Shabistan Cinema

Hall. Then he climbed over a wall and escaped into the neighbouring house called 'Baghwala Bari' said Munna Mia, 72, a resident of Malitola and Nader's cousin.

In a subsequent raid, the Pakistan troops along with local razakars interrogated the residents of the house who handed over Nader out of



Monowara Akter

fear. He was then taken to the Dhaka Cantonment, Munna said.

"There, the Pakistan army tortured him and then killed him," he added, citing Nader's fellow freedom fighters.

These freedom fighters include Mohammad Ali from Alu Bazar, Sadek from Siddik Bazar, Chorui Saeed from Golok Pal Lane, Shamsu alias Cenghis Khan from Mirpur, Abdullah from Shyambazar, among others, locals said.

Recalling Nader's bravery, Nurul Mia, 90, a resident of Kalta Bazar, told The Daily Star, "I had a good acquaintance with a Pakistan army officer. He once



Abdullah Bulu

told me -- "if they had four more boys like Nader, the country would have gained independence much earlier."

The scene of Armanitola, where Nader fought his last battle and was eventually captured, has changed completely.

During a recent visit, The Daily Star found that the Bagh Bari no longer exists. Shabistan, the cinema hall, is also gone. In its place, several residential-cum-commercial buildings, including Prottyasha Plaza, now stand tall.

RISE OF NADER

Nader Mia was born in Malitola in 1930s. His father was a court clerk, and Nader was his eldest son. He studied at Jagannath College and was involved with student politics.

However, before completing college, Nader became involved with local gangs. One of his closest associates was Dulu Gunda, who later became widely known as the famous actor Faruk. In an interview nine years ago on Somo TV, Faruk himself revealed that between 1967 to 1971, there were 37 cases filed against him.

During the Non-Cooperation Movement in March 1971, shopkeepers in ration stores started hoarding goods

to sell at higher prices, leading to a severe shortage of essential products. When the war broke out, Pakistani forces looted these ration shops. In this dire situation, Nader and his gang members broke into a ration store on Golak Pal Lane and distributed the stockpiled wheat, sugar, and rice among the local people, according to multiple elderly residents of Malitola.

"Nader may have had a bad reputation outside our neighbourhood, but within our community, he had immense respect for the elders. Words cannot describe the level of honour he showed them. He also cared deeply for us younger ones," said Mohammad Habib, a businessman from Shyambazar, who spent his childhood and teenage years in Malitola.

SHAHEED NADER'S FAMILY

Today, the only sign of his contribution is an old, dust-covered signboard: "Shaheed Nader Smriti Sangsad, Established in 1972."

Locals said one of Nader's brothers had established the club after independence, but it no longer functions. No photographs of Nader could be found there.

Locals said Nader's brother Harun was also killed during the war. Their remaining family members still live in Malitola. Two of his brothers are alive, but they declined to talk about Nader. Nader's wife and son now live in Keraniganj.

'LOVE' IN TIMES OF UPRISING

During the turbulent days of the mass uprising of 1969, all of Dhaka was in turmoil. In such an intense time, Nader went to visit his friend Habil's house in Shahjahanpur.

There, he became fond of a girl named Mary, whose father passed away and whose mother lived in Barishal. Habil's parents were raising her.

Having fallen in love with her, Nader proposed marriage to Habil's parents but they refused. Later that night, Nader and Mary eloped, got married and returned to Malitola. Initially, Nader's parents did not accept the marriage, but after a few days, they changed their minds.

After the marriage, Nader changed Mary's name to Monowara Akter.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Monowara, 70, said, "Everything was going well. Though people outside called him a gangster, he had a kind heart. He was always out all day. But he loved me very much."

But Monowara's happiness did not last long. Just two years after their marriage, war broke out and Nader joined the war, sending his wife to Manikganj. Monowara was five months into her pregnancy then. She received the news of her husband's death while in Manikganj.

Abdullah Bulu, Nader and Mary's only child was born during the war.

After the war, Monowara returned to Malitola with her infant son and later shifted to his brother's house in Keraniganj. Abdullah now runs a small business in Shyambazar and lives in Keraniganj.

"When people tell me, 'Your father did such courageous things,' I can't hold back my tears. My father gave his life for this country, but he was never truly honoured," Abdullah said, with his mother by his side.