



#HERITAGE

# SHAKRAIN

## Kites and tastes of Old Dhaka

Every year, on the evening of 14 January, a walk around the streets of Old Dhaka would reveal an unfamiliar vibe in the familiar streets as Dhakaites prepare to celebrate Shakrai. Along with the lively chatter on the streets, rooftops become active, and the sky turns into a battleground for aerial kite fights.

Marking the end of Poush on the Bengali calendar, "Poush Sankranti", as it is known, is not just about outward celebrations. As kites soar high in the air, households remain busy preparing traditional Bengali pithas, rice cakes, and other treats that bring families and neighbours together.

### Narinda and the tradition of Shakrai

Among Dhaka's oldest neighbourhoods, Narinda is noted for landmark structures like the Binat Bibi Mosque, established in 1452 C.E., the famed Baldha Garden, and the historic Christian cemetery. As you stroll around the neighbourhood, you will come across eateries like Beauty Lassi and Jhunur Polao, which add a gastronomic layer to the fabric of this famed locality.

Syed Jahangir, 74, has lived here for the better part of his life and can trace his ancestral roots in Narinda's Lalmohan Saha Street. For generations, his family has witnessed the glory days of Old Dhaka, its fall from prominence, and a recent but renewed interest in its history and culture.

"Shakrai is now observed by the entire community of Old Dhaka," he said. "To this day, Narinda remains one of the hotspots of the Shakrai festival."

Strolling through these streets, one feels a sense of unity as residents prepare for the celebration. It seems that while the rituals of the occasion have not been fully adopted, the festivities have been widely accepted and practised.

### Early memories and festive foods

Syed Jahangir gave us a snippet of his earliest recollections of the festivities, which would always begin at dawn.

"Soon after morning prayers, families would gather around a spread of delectable pithas prepared by the women of the

household," he said.

For over forty years, Nasima Jahan has held the mantle of the Jahangir family. She shared that the fragrant rice cakes somewhat symbolised the warmth of the tradition.

"The preparations for the elaborate breakfast would begin days before as the finest rice grains from the harvest were sourced, husked, and chipped or powdered for making pithas.

