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Shubho Nababarsha

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PERSPECTIVE

In every bhorta there is a story of Bengal

Vegetables dressed with pungent mustard oil and raw onions — bhorta is an emotion every Bangladeshi can connect to. It never fails to astonish me how a hand-pressed ball of three ingredients transports me back to my happy place.

My mother tempering blackened dried red chillies in pure mustard oil to make the simple yet flavourful aloo bhorta, or mashed potatoes. Not to be confused with the western mashed potatoes, which are made with butter and cream. Not saying it's bad in any way, but it can never beat the spice of our "deshi" version.

We all argue about what makes us Bangladeshi. Some say it's our festivals, some say it's our traditions, and I think we can all agree that our love for flavourful food makes us Bangladeshi, and bhorta is definitely up there in that list.

Bhorta is not made with meticulous steps in Michelin-star kitchens. Think about it. They are not fancy or stressful, and don't need two days of preparation. You take whatever is lying around. Potatoes, eggplants, shutki, even beef or chicken. We can and will turn anything into bhorta. Surprisingly enough, vegetable peels work too!

On a philosophical note, that's basically the Bangladeshi personality. Life throws problems? Mash it. Mix it. Add a little spice. Carry on.

The simple presentation of bhorta reflects our laidback attitude. No complicated plating techniques, no finishing touches. Just place it on a plate with enough heat and mustard oil for your lips and ears to overheat, and it's good to go.

To me, it is a mirror of our hearts. It doesn't take much to make us Bangladeshis happy. All we need is food, friends, family and sleep, just like how a bhorta only needs some daal and rice.

CONTINUED TO PAGE 11

#HERITAGE

THE SECRET LIFE OF A SWEET

Why villages still make them better

What makes a good sweetmeat? Is it the softness, the texture, or something else entirely? A good sweet has certain characteristics like any good dessert, but is that all? A checklist that you tick, and if all the boxes are ticked, then it is a great delight — I'm afraid it's not as simple as that!

Many underlying factors affect the taste of a sweetmeat. Many of these are unseen, but they are the reason you get that unique and amazing taste in village sweets that just cannot be matched in the cities.

THE MILK AND SUGAR

It goes without saying that the quality of milk will have a direct effect on the sweets. Desserts that we find in the cities are often produced in bulk. The industries have to rely on vendors for the milk, and as it can happen in mass production, the milk can often be diluted with water, which affects the taste.

Sometimes, instead of natural milk, powdered milk or condensed milk is used in the production. This creates a different taste that is hard to miss. Sweet products produced from natural milk will always be superior without even a contest. One can actually feel the difference in texture based on the ingredients.

Same for sugar, or molasses, whatever is used as an ingredient. The more natural and less diluted the ingredient, the better the taste. Many sweetmeats rely heavily on the sugar-coated crust outside, and others rely on the filling inside. Either way, sugar is just as important as milk. And since milk and sugar are two of the major ingredients of sweets, the price of sugar has a direct parallel relation with the price of the dessert.

THE FIRE

Fire can bake or wreck the sweets! The stove and the fuel that is used for making the sweet can largely affect the taste. In the village, they usually use a large stove and more often than not, wood covers the majority of the fuel. In the cities, other methods are used that are more industry-friendly. On paper, it is more efficient and a better method, but on your taste buds, you can feel the difference in the fire.

Remember how you can taste the difference in flavour on kebabs depending on what fuel was used in the grilling process? Well, the same happens for sweets as well. This is one of the reasons why village sweets have that unique taste that you can feel but cannot quite place your finger on what it is.

THE EXPERTISE

Many enthusiasts have this opinion that the excellence of the confectioner is one of the defining factors in the taste, and once you think about it. It's not just the sweets; it's true for almost all food items.

Expert confectioners are rare. Those who do possess the acumen of the trade have developed it over many decades. And most confectioners are good at making one certain type of sweet. As a result, when they make that certain type of sweet, it's like their own signature in dessert form. This type of expertise is what sets the village sweets apart from the city ones.

THE HUMAN TOUCH AND LEGACY

Last but not least, the human touch!

There are too many sweet options in the cities, and they get restocked every day, which means they are produced by the ton. This is usually done in automated processes that require very little human intervention. Many sweet enthusiasts hold the belief that it is the human touch in the village sweets that makes them different.

In industrially produced sweets, they all have the same shape, weight, colour, and size. There is no deviation. However, as with all food items, the human touch creates a little deviation that tickles your palate. This makes the food enjoyable. It is hard to explain precisely how, but it also makes them taste better.

Another factor is the legacy of a brand. The human touch can create a magical taste that comes with human expertise. This skill has to be honed over years of hard work, and of course, there are certain secret recipes that are passed down through generations.

Many famous and even lesser-known sweetmeat brands carry that legacy today. And it is easy to find them. One can go into any village and ask any random person about the best sweets in that locality, and most people will have the same answer.

Sweets are one of the defining elements of Bengali culture. Sure, every other country has their own desserts, and many of them are unique, but very few of them are rooted in the culture as deeply as ours. They have been part of almost all of our traditions to the point that we cannot think of many traditions without sweets. And no matter how many options you get in the cities, very few of them can meet the high standard of taste that is found in the villages. It's another culturally significant fact; one that requires more research, attention and preserving.

By Ashif Ahmed Rudro
Illustration: K T Humaira
Photo: LS Archive / Sazzad Ibne Sayed

Special thanks to Dr Uday Shanker Biswas, Professor, Department of Folklore, University of Rajshahi, and a food connoisseur, for his valuable insights.

#CULTURE

The quiet lives of Dhaka's flute artistes

In the busy streets of the city, we rarely take a moment to cherish the little things around us. If you pause briefly and look closely, you will notice people doing all sorts of things just to make a living. While most serve a large market of customers, there are some who do it out of sheer love for their work. One such sight will make you pause: a street flute artiste, locally known as a "*bongshibadok*", playing on the streets of Dhaka, usually carrying a sack of flutes made of bamboo.

Mokbul Hossain is one such flautistwho spends his days navigating the Mohammadpur area of the city, selling and playing flutes. By late afternoon, when the streets of Mohammadpur begin to grow vibrant, he turns to his instrument. Roaming among passersby, he plays simply because it brings him peace and offers a moment of joy to others.

"I play the flute, usually in the afternoon when I feel good, to give people some joy," he says.

He often plays various "Lalongeeti", "Bonde Maya Lagaise", "Aage Ki Shundor Din Kataitam", and other folk songs that reflect the sentiments of Bengali culture.

Come to think of it, it is not just music, it is a quiet resistance against the cacophony of the city. Some stop and listen to his melodic tunes, while many curious

passersby step forward to browse his collection of crudely made bamboo flutes.

Mokbul's introduction to music came from his own curiosity rather than family tradition. "I have been playing the flute for about 20–23 years. I have been selling them for 15 years. I travel all over Bangladesh — to fairs, markets, and mostly cultural spots. Back in the day, I started playing regularly out of passion. It began as a hobby. Later, I learned the craft under an ustad (teacher)."

He even offers to teach curious visitors the basics of playing the flute and plays their requested songs to attract potential buyers. He sources his flutes from local artisans in the village of Sreemoddi, under Cumilla's Homna upazila. He oversees the entire manufacturing process of his flutes, making necessary adjustments to improve both sound and look, and occasionally takes part in the work himself.

Today, his relationship with music extends into the next generation. His daughters, both pursuing postgraduate studies, have inherited not just his flute skills but perhaps a deeper love for music. "Whether it be flute, violin, or dotara, my daughters actually play them even better than I do," he expressed, with a mix of pride and humility.

Mokbul Hossain is one of many, and the streets of Dhaka are alive with dedication of several other street artists. In another part of the city, a similar story repeats itself in the life of another flute artist.

Monir Hossain is another flautist navigating the Gulshan 2 area. Pleased by his melodic renditions of Lalon songs, passersby occasionally offer him a small token of appreciation, commonly referred to as "*bokhshish*".

He hopes for a country where artists can live with dignity. "I just want to live in a country where artists and creative workers can freely practice their art and make a living with the same respect as anyone else," he asserted. "We do not expect anyone to feed us for free. We just want to coexist with everyone — with respect."

Like many other flute artists, he supplements his street performances by seeking opportunities at birthday parties, weddings, and small events — anywhere his music might be valued enough to bring in a modest income.

It does not fully feed their families, nor does it guarantee them due recognition. Yet, their dedication for the pursuit of music thrives despite their daily struggles.

The Pied Piper of Hamelin led people with his flute toward an unknown destination, to their oblivion, when he was not paid his dues. Mokbul and Monir ask for no such thing, they just want a little appreciation, and perhaps, a little respect. In a society increasingly driven by material gains, their flutes tell a rather different story, one where value is not always measured in money.

By Minhazur Rahman Alvee
Participant: Mokbul Hossain
Photo: Tahiyat Nazifa Noor

#TRADE

Traditional musical instruments fade in demand

Before every Baishakh, musical instrument stores were bustling places. Most musical schools used to commence classes after Pahela Baishakh, and it was a ritual for aspiring students to get instruments for the new year. Others would come simply to repair their old instruments for a Baishakhi soiree. However, time changes everything. Today, it's hard to find customers in musical stores. Although a variety of instruments, such as guitars, ukuleles, and banjos, are displayed on the walls, unfortunately, our traditional instruments are found sitting in the corners, gathering dust!

Ratan Roy, the proprietor of "Music Plus" at Science Lab, shared his experience.

"Harmoniums and tablas are hardly sold now. Perhaps a harmonium gets sold once in a while. Even two years ago, things were still relatively okay. The current situation is an absolute deadlock. This business requires massive investment, but currently, the result is zero. If you make large investments and the products are not being used, it essentially becomes a loss project," Ratan explained.

The decline of traditional instruments reflects a complicated interaction of technological shifts, changing cultural preferences and economic pressures. The most immediate and devastating factor affecting the industry is the rising cost of living.

According to another retailer, Md Jahirul Islam of "Civic Music Point", the prices of daily essentials have skyrocketed. When families must prioritise fundamental needs and children's education, there is no "extra money" left for entertainment or musical instruments.

Islam expressed, "There is no attraction toward music nowadays. Only after meeting essential expenses can a person have extra money for joy or to buy something for their child. That extra money simply is not there anymore."

Aside from economics, the sense of traditional instruments is diminishing due to contemporary technology. There is an evident change in the way music is taught and executed.

Even in conventional groups, technology is supplanting craftsmanship. The electric tanpura has mostly taken the place of the acoustic version, and "novelties" discovered online, like the synthetic banjo, are frequently preferred over traditional instruments like the dotara.

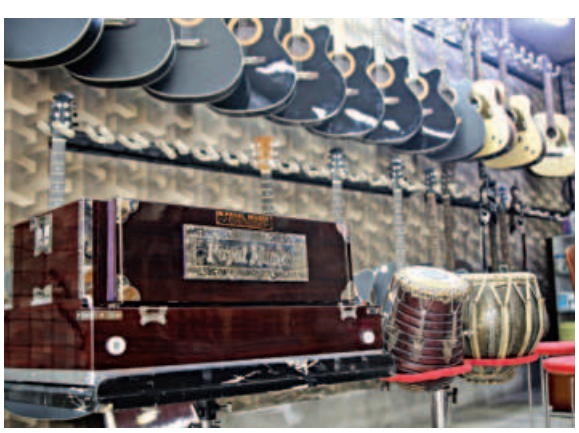
For many young artists, traditional instruments feel unnecessary as they can now just compose, edit and produce a whole track on a laptop.

Roni Bormon, of "Surasree", said, "Previously, there was a sense that to learn any kind of song – modern or folk – you had to learn by playing the harmonium. While some still learn properly from the 'sargam,' those numbers are much lower now. People just want to pick up an instrument and start singing songs they have heard. This is what people like Bormon consider a reason for the decline of traditional instruments.

"We need government initiatives and cultural programmes at the school level to bring the next generation back to our cultural roots," he remarked. "Our business has been very bad for the last two or three years," Bormon added with a pale smile.

The silence surrounding our traditional instrument trade is not sudden; it has been gradual, almost unnoticeable, until one day the absence became impossible to ignore. Today, the challenge to the young generation is not just to preserve these instruments as a cultural symbol but to restore their place in the economy. Till then, all the harmoniums, tablas or dotaras will remain in the corner of a random store, waiting for you to be cared for.

By Sabrin Zawad Ritu
Photo: Tahiyat Nazifa Noor



Bring back the ALTA and CHURI

April 14, circa 1996. One can still remember the hush, the reverence, the excitement when a small bottle of the deep red liquid was opened. The hue of the alta, dazzling and instant, was an essential adornment for brides, dancers and women celebrating festivals. Add some clacking and clinking churis to the hands, and voila! The ultimate Bengali look was complete.

Decades ago, alta and churi were everyday adornments for women in villages, small towns and even big cities. Women stepped out in bright alta for weddings, pujas and harvest festivals; dancers of jatra and local theatre relied on it to make gestures visible from the stage. Alta practices varied regionally, too — thick red strokes on soles in Sylhet, finer fingertip accents elsewhere.

Churis made of lac, warm and hand-crafted, brightly coloured glass, heirloom metals, and wooden and terracotta, often found in village fairs, announced marriages, births and neighbourhood gossip through marketplaces and homes.

Alta and churi were more than adornments — they were woven into core memories of tradition and togetherness. When the women of the house gathered to dress in colour and ornaments, they forged deep female bonds.

"Alta came from my mother's hands. She would hum while painting my feet," recalls an elder from Jessore. "When my daughters wear it now, I remember my own wedding day."

Then came modernisation and with it, mass-produced cosmetics, and changing fashions. Synthetic colours replaced natural dyes, and while churis remained firmly in the scene, the modality of their production changed, with plastic overpowering hand-pressed lac and blown glass. For the regular alta and churi lovers of the time, the changes were heartbreaking.

"It just wasn't the same," said Aroni Jalal, a middle-aged homemaker. "My childhood was spent decorating my hands and feet in alta, but suddenly these newer bottles were giving me rashes."

Aroni also recalls how her khala, now old and frail, would shake her head in disappointment every time she saw a plastic churi. "They were cheaper," she remembers, "However, khala loved traditional glass bangles, and suddenly, those were hard to find!"

Younger generations also began to prefer the intricate designs of henna, or mehndi, limiting the beloved red to older women or specific rituals. Traditionalists felt that the sun had set forever on their favourite alta and even the churis as they knew them.

However, one good thing about fashion is that it keeps circling back to the past and steered by a renewed interest of the masses in heritage crafts and sustainable materials, alta and the artisanal churis are making a slow, but definite comeback into the conversations of the fashion savvy.

Designers in Dhaka are gradually being seen incorporating alta into modern bridal editorials, and boutiques are starting to pair traditional lac bangles with contemporary outfits again. Local initiatives are also being set up to teach young makers to mix natural alta and to work with lac and glass using traditional methods. Young designers and artisans feel that the same craft, reimagined, can resonate with new generations without losing its essence or freshness.

In Bangladesh's dynamic marketplaces, this comeback matters. Relearning to mix natural alta, or to press lac into bright churi shapes, is not merely nostalgia but cultural preservation: the red on a bride's feet and the chorus of bangles on her arm are threads that link generations of brides together, in the spirit of culture and the quintessential female essence.

By Munira Fidai
Photo: Adnan Rahman
Model: Shakira
Fashion Direction & Styling: Sonia Yeasmin Isha
Makeup: Sumon Rahat
Hiar: Probina

DESHI MIX

SALINA PARVIN

Sugary treats that tell the story of Baishakh

Crunchy, sweet, and deeply nostalgic, Baishakh sweets are more than festive treats. They are edible memories passed down through generations. From brittle peanut confections to airy sugar drops, each sweet carries the warmth of home and the joy of a new beginning. As families gather to welcome the Bengali New Year, these timeless recipes bring together tradition, celebration, and the simple magic of sugar transformed.

BADAM ER KOTKOTI (PEANUT BRITTLE)
Ingredients
1 cup peanuts (badam), roasted and skins removed
1½ cup sugar
4 tbsp water
1 tsp ghee
A pinch of baking soda (optional, for a lighter texture)

Method
First, dry roast the peanuts in a pan until they become slightly golden and aromatic. Remove the skins and keep them aside. In another pan, add sugar and water and cook on medium heat until the sugar melts and turns into a light golden caramel. Stir occasionally so it does not burn.

Once the syrup becomes thick and bubbly, add the roasted peanuts and mix quickly so that all the peanuts are coated with the caramel. If you want a slightly airy and crisp texture, add a tiny pinch of baking soda and mix well. Then immediately pour the mixture onto a greased tray or parchment paper. Spread it using a greased rolling pin or spatula. While it is still warm, cut it into small pieces. Let it cool completely until hard and crunchy.

CHHANAMUKHI
Ingredients
1 litre full-cream milk
2 tbsp lemon juice or vinegar (to curdle the milk)
1 tsp flour
1 cup sugar
½ cup water
Oil or ghee for frying

Method
First, in a pan boil the milk. Add lemon juice or vinegar and stir gently until the milk curdles and the chhana separates from the whey. Strain it through a clean cloth and rinse with cold water to remove the sour taste. Squeeze out the excess water and knead the chhana with 1 teaspoon of flour until smooth.Next, shape the chhana into small cubes or diamond-shaped pieces. Heat oil or ghee in a pan over medium heat and fry the chhana pieces until light golden in colour. Remove from oil and set aside.

In another pan, cook the sugar and water together to make a syrup. When the syrup becomes slightly thick, add the fried chhana pieces. Keep stirring on low heat until the sugar starts to crystallize and forms a white coating around the sweets. Let them cool completely before serving.

BATASHA (TRADITIONAL SUGAR DROPS)
Ingredients
1 cup sugar
½ cup water
A pinch of baking soda
2–3 drops lemon juice

Method
In a pan, combine sugar and water and heat gently until the sugar dissolves completely. Then boil the syrup until it reaches a thick, two-thread consistency. Add a few drops of lemon juice to prevent crystallisation.

Turn off the heat and let the syrup cool slightly until it becomes thick and opaque. At this stage, add a pinch of baking soda and beat the mixture quickly with a spoon until it turns light and slightly frothy.

Immediately drop small portions of the mixture onto a greased plate or parchment paper using a spoon. Let them cool and harden completely at room temperature. Once set, the batashas will become light, airy, and crisp.

CHINIR MURALI
Ingredients
2 cup all-purpose flour
2 tbsp milk powder
Water, as needed
Oil, for deep frying
2 cups sugar
½ tsp baking powder
A pinch of salt

Method
In a bowl, pour flour, milk, baking powder and salt. Mix well and add water to it. Knead well and make the dough. Make four parts from the dough. Roll each part out with about ½-inch thickness. Then cut the slab into finger long sticks. Now heat oil in a pan. Deep fry the sticks on low heat until crunchy. Make sure these do not turn red.
For the sugar coating —
In a saucepan, mix 1 cup of water with sugar. Stir on medium heat to make thick and sticky syrup. Then add the fried sticks. Mix well. Allow the sticks to cool. Store and serve.

KHOI ER MURKI
Ingredients
200g khoi (popped rice)
300g sugar
½ cup water
1 tbsp ginger juice

Method
Pour ½ cup of water in a pan and add sugar. Keep the pan on medium flame. Keep on stirring until the sugar becomes sticky. Now switch off the gas and after three minutes add khoi and ginger juice. Mix continuously with a spatula for the proper coating of sugar. Allow it to cool down. After cooling, store the murki in an air tight container.

KADMA
Ingredients
2 cups sugar
1 cup water
1–2 tbsp lemon juice
A pinch of cardamom powder

Method
In a pan and add sugar and water. Heat it on medium flame and stir until the sugar completely dissolves. Once it starts boiling, add a little lemon juice. Keep cooking until the syrup becomes thick and reaches a hard-crack stage. (When a drop put in the cold water it becomes hard and brittle).

Now comes to the tricky part. At this stage, you need to work quickly. Remove the pan from heat and start stirring the syrup continuously until it starts turning slightly opaque and grainy. At this point, quickly take small portions and drop them onto a greased tray, shaping them into round lumps. Let them cool and harden completely. Your homemade kadma is ready — crunchy on the outside with a slightly airy texture inside, perfecwt for a nostalgic sweet treat!

TILL CHAKKI (SESAME BRITTLE)
Ingredients
1 cup white sesame seeds
1 cup sugar
2 tbsp water
1 tsp ghee
A pinch of cardamom powder (optional)

Method
First, dry roast the sesame seeds in a pan on low heat until they become lightly golden and fragrant. Stir continuously so they do not burn. Remove from the pan and keep aside. In the same pan, add sugar and water and cook on medium heat until the sugar melts and forms a light golden syrup. Add the ghee and a pinch of cardamom powder for flavour. When the syrup reaches a sticky consistency, quickly mix in the roasted sesame seeds and stir well so all the seeds are coated. Immediately pour the mixture

onto a greased tray or parchment paper and spread it thin with a greased rolling pin or spatula. While it is still warm, cut it into squares or diamond shapes. Let it cool completely until crisp.

GOJA
Ingredients
2 cups refined flour
1 cup sugar
A pinch of baking powder
2 tbsp ghee
2 green cardamom
1 tbsp lemon juice
Salt to taste
Oil for deep fry

Method
Combine sugar, water and cardamom pods in a heavy bottom pan. Bring to a boil. Stir frequently. As the syrup thickens, reduce the heat and test the consistency. Once the sugar syrup has reached a two-string consistency, turn off the heat and add lemon juice (this prevents the syrup from crystallising). Keep warm. In a bowl mix flour, salt and baking powder. Add ghee and work it well into the mixture. Add water little by little and knead till stiff dough is formed.

Divide the dough into equal portions and using rolling pin roll out into ovals. Make several slashes on the ovals with a knife or a fork. Heat sufficient ghee or oil in a pan and deep fry the gojas till light brown and crisp. Remove with a slotted spoon and place on an absorbent paper to remove excess oil or ghee. Dip the fried gojas into the sugar syrup. Coat rapidly and remove quickly. Toss till dry and crisp.

SUGAR COTED JHINUK PITHA
Ingredients
1 cup semolina
½ cup flour
1 egg
1tbsp ghee
¼ tsp baking powder
4 tbsp warm milk
Oil for deep fry
A pinch of salt
For sugar syrup —
1 cup sugar
¼ cup water

Method
Take semolina, flour, sugar, salt, baking powder, and ghee in a large bowl. And mix it well. Now add the egg and knead the dough. Dough must not be too dry nor too soft. Make small balls from the dough. Take one ball and shaped it like an egg, then spread it on top of a colander thinly and start to fold from one end and finish it to another end and close it. Using the same process make all the pitha. Now heat oil in a pan. Fry the pitha until golden brown and then take it out from oil to a paper tissue. Fry rest of the pitha and keep it aside. Now pour ¼ cup of water in a pan and add sugar. Keep the pan on medium flame. Keep on stirring until the sugar becomes sticky. Now switch off the gas and after three minutes add fried pithas. Mix continuously with a spatula for the proper coating of sugar. You can preserve this pitha in an airtight box for 2/3 weeks.

GUJIYA
Ingredients
For the dough —
2 cups refined flour
¼ cup clarified butter
A pinch of salt
Water to mix
For the filling —
1 cup mawa
1 tbsp sugar
½ tsp cardamom powder
2 tbsp almonds, finely chopped
Oil or ghee for deep frying
For the syrup —
1 cup sugar
1 cup water

Method
Rub ¼ cup ghee into the flour and knead into a stiff dough with water. Leave to rest for at least half an hour. Now saute the mawa over medium heat till it looks slightly fried. Add sugar and mix well. Cook for 2 minutes. Add cardamom powder and almonds. Mix well and remove from heat. Allow the filling to cool. Shape the filling into ovals about 21 cm length and 1 cm thickness.

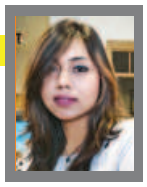
Make balls of the dough and roll out into small round roti. Take a round roti, wet the edges with water and place a piece of filling over one half. Fold the other half over and press the edges together to seal, make a design by pinching and twisting all along the sealed edges. Make all the gujiya in this way. Heat ghee or oil in a pan, fry the gujiya till golden brown on all sides.

Make sugar syrup by cooking water and sugar together, till one thread consistency. Dip the fried gujiya into the sugar syrup. Lift and let dry on a plate. Serve or store in air tight container.

Food & Recipes by Salina parvin
Photo: Silvia Mahjabin
Decor: RBR

Baishakh far from home but still close to the heart

LIFE AS IT IS
WARA KARIM
Writer, painter, gardener, content creator
Website: http://www.scratchingout.com



The first day of the Bengali calendar is a vibrant celebration of our rich cultural heritage, a reminder of who we are, and a bridge to our past. Whether they are at home or 9,000 miles away from their roots, the Pahela Baishakh celebration is something Bangladeshis eagerly anticipate every year.

The Bangladeshi diaspora, spread across the globe, celebrates Pahela Baishakh in various ways, from small-scale gatherings to grand celebrations. These festivities include traditional Bengali cuisine, folk music and dance, Baishakhi fairs, and more. We spoke to some of our non-resident Bangladeshi (NRB) women to gain insights into how they celebrate Pahela Baishakh while residing outside of Bangladesh.

Dr Nazia Hussein, Bristol, England

Dr Nazia Hussein, who is a senior lecturer of sociology at the University of Bristol, England, says that her current city, Bristol, has quite a large population of first-generation Bangladeshi immigrants, and the Pahela Baishakh celebration usually brings together 120 to 150 people each year.

The day-long celebration features around one hundred food items, with a brunch of more than twenty types of pitha, and an afternoon snack featuring tea, chotpoti, fuchka, samosa, shingara, muri, murki, and the like. The afternoon snack is followed by a hearty dinner.

"Last year, we made twenty-six types of bhorta, four or five fish items, daal, vegetables, chicken, beef, bou khud, khichuri, and plain rice. It is a grand Baishakhi dinner that we cook every year," she said.

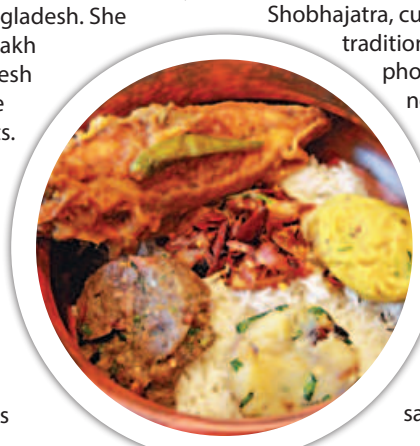
A big attraction of their Baishakhi celebration is the children's performance, which Dr Hussein supervises every year. Last year, twenty-six children participated in a skit, which included a drama, a dance, and a song.

"We usually rehearse for about three months before the final performance, and I think that the weekly rehearsals are often much more fun than the actual show," Dr Hussein said.

"It is so endearing to see how these children, who were born in England and cannot speak Bengali fluently, enjoy participating in Bengali dance and music," she added.

Asked if she misses the Bengali New Year celebration in Bangladesh, Dr Hussein said that she does not. She thinks that the Pahela Baishakh celebration they have in Bristol is perhaps richer and more culturally attuned than it is in Bangladesh. She thinks that Pahela Baishakh celebrations in Bangladesh have changed over time because of cultural shifts.

"Here in Bristol, however, the Bangladeshi community celebrates Pahela Baishakh just like they did in Bangladesh twenty or twenty-five years ago," she said. "I think it is nostalgia that makes us celebrate Pahela Baishakh just like we did when we grew up in Bangladesh, or maybe you can say that we, first-generation immigrants, are just frozen in time."



Shahzia Sarwar, Oregon, USA

A resident of Portland, Oregon, Shahzia Sarwar has been fortunate enough to participate in grand Pahela Baishakh celebrations across three American states: New York, California, and Oregon.

To Sarwar, who is a lecturer of architecture, urban design, and digital visualisations at State University of New York (SUNY), Albany, New York, and Academy of Art University, San Francisco, California, Pahela Baishakh is a vibrant celebration that acts as a cultural bridge, connecting all Bangladeshis to their heritage and roots through Mangal Shobhajatra, cultural programmes, traditional attire, special photoshoots, and last but not least, mouthwatering Baishakhi favourites like bhorta, panta-ilish, pitha, and beloved street foods like fuchka and jhalmuri.

Asked if she feels more connected to her roots during the Pahela Baishakh celebration, Sarwar said, "The Bangladeshi community eagerly awaits this annual celebration. People set up food stalls and participate in songs and dances with great enthusiasm. This is the time of the year when the Bangladeshi community comes together, experiencing a unique sense of unity and an inner drive to preserve their cultural identity."

Sarwar and her family always try to actively participate in Pahela Baishakh events through musical and dance performances.

"My husband and I always encourage our two children to speak Bangla at home and to listen to Bangla songs. We also make it a priority to take our children to the Baishakhi mela that our community arranges every year, as it allows them to learn about and appreciate Bengali culture," she said.

Rabeya Zahed, Sydney, Australia

For Rabeya Zahed, an HR professional at Campbelltown City Council in New South Wales, Australia, Pahela Baishakh has always been a double celebration; her birthday coincides with Pahela Baishakh, which falls on April 14. However, since Pahela Baishakh is a much larger occasion to celebrate, her birthday often takes a backseat.

Every year, Zahed cooks a traditional Baishakhi meal at her home to usher in the Bengali New Year. The menu typically includes bou khud/khuder bhat, and several types of bhorta, fried fish, daal, and meat dishes. However, Zahed deeply misses the Baishakhi celebrations of her childhood with her friends and family.

"The Pahela Baishakh vibe is completely missing here. When you step outdoors, you do not see women in red and white saris, their hands adorned with glass bangles, and their hair in white garlands. Also, in Bangladesh, it is a public holiday, which makes it even more enjoyable," she said.

However, various Bangladeshi communities of New South Wales organise grand Pahela Baishakh festivals every year. Zahed and her family also visit these festivals as part of their Pahela Baishakh celebrations. Additionally, Bangladeshis also host private Baishakhi parties at home.

"I have received two Baishakhi invitations for this year," she said.

The Bangladeshi diaspora, spread across the world, looks forward to their annual Pahela Baishakh celebration. They welcome the first day of the Bengali New Year through various cultural performances, Mangal Shobhajatra, traditional Baishakhi delicacies, and other expressions of appreciation for their cultural heritage. In spite of residing thousands of miles away from their homeland, the love for their roots and Bengali identity remains steadfast in the hearts of non-resident Bangladeshis.

Photo: Shahzia Sarwar, Oregon, USA

In every bhorta there is a story of Bengal

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Bhorta is what connects us back to our roots. No upscale dining can ever satisfy the craving of a good, fiery bhorta. For many expatriates and international students living away from home, it is a portal that takes them back home, a dinner table surrounded by loved ones.

The humble dish transcends social divides and unites us all. A great leveller, everyone, from a millionaire business tycoon to the hardworking day labourer, finds comfort in a dollop of their liking.

Many argue and attempt to pinpoint what makes a good dish. We can debate for hours on end. Some say it's the ingredients, some argue it's the order you mash it in, and some culinary "researchers" will assert that it's the temperature of the oil that makes the difference. To me, the hand making the bhorta is the make-or-break. Everyone swears that their mother or grandmother makes the best bhorta, and no one can come close.

While I am certain each bhorta tastes immaculate, I think the memories matter more than ingredients. The memories attached to the process might be what makes it taste the way it does. Making bhorta with my mother is a core childhood memory for me, which makes aloo bhorta the best in existence in my humble opinion.

That's the beauty. No two bhortas are the same. Each is uniquely individual, just like how we Bangladeshis are. No two of us are the same, but we are no different. To those who think a small country like Bangladesh does not have a significant impact, to them, I urge, just try our bhortas and your perspective will change for good.

By Zawad Arif Arian
Photo: LS Archive / Sazzad Ibne Sayed

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#CULTURE

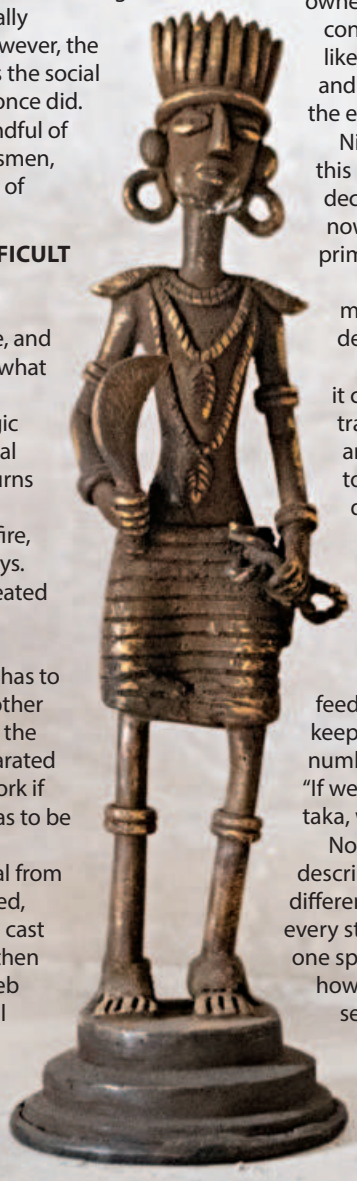
THE LAST RING OF BELL METAL: Inside Dhamrai's shrinking craft world

Abu Taleb has spent a lifetime working with bell metal, but he speaks about the trade without nostalgia. Now 57, the craft came to him through family and not through choice.

"My brother, my grandfather, my father," he says, tracing the line of inheritance in a matter-of-fact tone. "We have been doing this for generations." Then comes the part that defines the present. "Our whole family was in it, but now everyone has opted for other professions. I am the only one left."

That single statement says more about the condition of Dhamrai's metal craft than any official label of heritage ever could.

Dhamrai remains one of the places in Bangladesh still associated with kasha-pitol — bell metal and brass objects made for dining, ritual, and domestic use. Plates, bowls, cups, bells, cymbals, and utensils continue to be produced here through labour-intensive, materially exacting techniques. However, the industry no longer holds the social or economic position it once did. It survives through a handful of workshops, ageing craftsmen, and a shrinking network of merchants.



WORKING WITH A DIFFICULT METAL

Bell metal is not an easy material. It is hard, brittle, and unforgiving. That is also what gives it value.

Taleb explains the logic of the material in practical terms. He buys metal, burns it, and works from there. "When you burn it with fire, it breaks like glass," he says. That brittleness is not treated as a flaw but as proof of authenticity.

In his view, the metal has to remain pure. If brass or other mixed material gets into the process, it has to be separated immediately. "It won't work if it's impure," he says. "It has to be grade one."

The process is physical from the outset. Metal is heated, broken down, reworked, cast into an initial form, and then hammered outward. Taleb describes making a small mould first and then hammering it out until it reaches the desired size. From there, artisans add shape and design according to the merchant's order.

The products vary: plates, bowls, bells, temple cymbals, cups, and other utensils. Unlike brass showpieces or cast decorative items made elsewhere, his work is rooted in original bell metal and functional use.

That distinction matters to him. He is careful about separating his trade from adjacent ones. Brass statues, he notes, are also made in Dhamrai. Brass plates are produced in another nearby factory. His own work, based in Shimulia, is "strictly bell metal."

THE WORKERS BEHIND THE CRAFT

If Abu Taleb represents ownership and continuity, workers like Niranjan Sarkar and Noyon Sarkar reveal the economics underneath it.

Niranjan is 50 and has been in this line of work for more than three decades. He began as a child and now works at Abu Taleb's factory, primarily doing design work.

"Whatever design the merchant wants, I create that design," he says.

His phrasing is simple, but it captures the structure of the trade. Craftsmen rarely work for artistic autonomy. They produce to order, according to market demand.

Asked about income, Niranjan does not dramatise the situation.

"The household runs somehow," he says.

There are five people to feed. The income is just enough to keep things moving. Then he puts a number to the threshold of survival: "If we don't earn at least five hundred taka, we struggle."

Noyon Sarkar, another artisan, describes a similar reality from a different angle. He says he can do every stage of the work rather than just one specialised task. That flexibility, however, has not translated into security. "There is no daily income anymore," he says bluntly. His wage was fixed at Tk 500, but even that is eroded by expenses. "We are in a complete crisis."

Together, their accounts show that the fading of the craft is not just about cultural loss. It is about wages that no longer match labour, and labour that no longer guarantees continuity.

THE RISING COST

One of the clearest reasons the trade is under strain is the cost of materials.

Abu Taleb remembers when copper could be bought for Tk 160 per kilogram. Today, depending on quality, it can cost ten times that amount. He mentions a thicker, higher-quality variety that now sells for Tk 1,700. That kind of increase changes the entire structure of production.

He also points to another difficulty: tin is no longer easy to source and has become too expensive to rely on comfortably. As a result, he often buys old bell metal or brass items from shops and recycles them into new products.

Hawkers and traders bring material into the chain, and he reworks it into finished goods. This recycling economy keeps the workshops alive, but it is also a sign of pressure. The price of material affects not only profit but also risk. If a product does not sell, the loss is heavier than before. If electricity fails in the middle of production, that loss compounds.

WHEN POWER CUTS STOP PRODUCTION

Bell metal work is often described in terms of tradition, but its present-day survival depends on something much less romantic: fuel, electricity, and supply access.

Abu Taleb speaks plainly about the electricity crisis. On some days, announcements are made that there will be no power, and the factory work stops. A generator exists, but that only shifts the problem. Fuel is difficult to find. He once managed to run the generator for a few days with five litres collected from a bus driver's stock. After that, the search continued. "There are all sorts of problems," he informs.

This is where the language of heritage often fails. Craft survival is not just about preserving techniques. It is also about ensuring that artisans can actually keep their workshops running.

A MARKET THAT STILL SURVIVES

Despite the challenges, Dhamrai's metal craft has not vanished. Products still move through wholesale channels and urban shops.

Abu Taleb delivers finished goods to Mitford in Dhaka to a cluster of shops. Merchants there sell wholesale across Bangladesh. The system is old and functional: merchants give orders, artisans produce, and the goods circulate. He also has a shop in Shimulia Bazaar and another retail outlet in Dhaka.

There are still customers for original bell metal. Some buy it because of its association with health. Abu Taleb says well-off buyers from nearby areas, including the EPZ zone, come directly to purchase utensils because they believe eating from bell metal is beneficial.

Others seek out specific ritual items. School bells and temple cymbals remain part of his production line. In larger temples, he says, pure bell metal cymbals can sell for several thousand takas.

So, the market has not disappeared. It has narrowed. It now depends more on niche demand, selective buyers, and merchant networks than on widespread household use.

WHAT REMAINS

The fading of Dhamrai's metal craft is not a dramatic collapse. It is a slow reduction. Fewer families stay in it. Fewer sons inherit it. Costs rise. Infrastructure falters. Demand becomes selective. Workshops continue, but with less assurance.

Still, the craft is not gone. It persists in the measured force of hammering, in the care taken over purity, in the ability of workers like Niranjan to shape designs according to a merchant's request, and in Abu Taleb's insistence that he does not compromise on quality.

That is what makes the situation difficult to read. Dhamrai's bell metal tradition is both alive and endangered at the same time. The objects are still being made. The knowledge is still present. However, the social system that once reproduced that knowledge is thinning out.

Abu Taleb does not dress this up as a tragedy. He states it as the condition of his life and work. He is still here. The furnace still burns when fuel can be found. The hammer still falls. The merchants still come. But, around that continuity is an unmistakable silence: the absence of those who would have taken the work forward next.

By Ayman Anika
Photos: Silvia Mahjabin
Readers interested in buying bell metal products or placing an order may reach Abu Taleb at 01969369325.