

# NOT JUST CHILD'S PLAY

## Bengal's rhymes as cultural memory



DESIGN: DOWEL BISWAS

**"I think I had a learning disability as a child. I took my time with words," says Faria Raisha, a homemaker and former corporate employee. "But my mother and grandparents kept repeating chhoras and folktales. I began speaking through rhythm before I understood meaning."**

DOWEL BISWAS

Now a mother, she sees the same process unfold. "My son doesn't fully understand yet. But he reacts to rhythm, to gestures. Bengali *chhoras* have their own way of communicating." For journalist Tanim Ahmed, memory resides elsewhere. "I don't quite remember what the stories were about. I just remember the sense of the stories, *chhoras* and most of all, Dadijaan's (grandmother's) voice. Dadijaan, who is very dear to me, used to tell me these stories. Later on, in life, Dadijaan caught dementia, and she started to forget things; she sometimes could not recognise me. But every time I looked at her—and now that I miss her—I miss her voice telling me these stories most." These are not simply memories. They point to a structure. To speak of Bengali rhymes—*chhora*—only as child's play is to miss their cultural gravity. Embedded in everyday speech, games, lullabies, counting chants and ritual contexts, these short verses function as a vernacular archive of social experience, historical memory and collective

imagination. The recognition of this form is not new. As early as the late 19th century, Jogindranath Sarkar, in his work on "Khukumonir Chhora", formally identified rhymes as a literary category—Chhorasahitya (rhythmic literature). Later, Dinesh Chandra Sen's extensive documentation of Bengali folk literature further established their anthropological and historical value. They circulate where formal records never reached—in rural compounds, in play circles under mango trees, in kitchens and in the rhythms of work and rest. As a cultural practice and as a form of early cognition, they are among the most enduring modes through which people in Bengal have learned language, absorbed social relations and, often without conscious intent, encoded history. This is not mere assertion. Folklorists have long recognised multiple categories within Bengali folk literature—songs, proverbs, riddles, and rhymes. Rhymes are not homogeneous; they appear in distinct functional types: nursery rhymes, social or satirical rhymes,

occupational rhymes, ritual rhymes, and those associated with games. That diversity signals not triviality, but embeddedness. In their rhythmic repetition are folded patterns of labour, hierarchy, crisis and adaptation. To understand why this matters, one must return to the verses themselves. "Aglom bagdom ghoradom saje, dhak mridang jhanjhar baje..." At one level, it is soundplay. At another, structure. Scholars—including interpretations referenced by Haraprasad Shastri—have read within it traces of Dom military formations in pre-modern Bengal. Roughly translating to vanguard, flank, mounted movement: formations now largely absent from formal historiography. Yet they persist in rhyme. What history omits, rhythm retains. "Ikir mikir chamchikir, chame kata Majumdar..." Now a counting chant, the line carries a sharper edge. Some readings connect

Here, the colonial world enters. The "saheb babu" marks hierarchy; the "boithokkhana" becomes a site of access and control. The insertion of "bioscope" suggests temporal layering—oral forms absorbing modern technologies without losing their structure. The most enduring example remains the lullaby: "Khoka ghumalo para juralo, Bargi elo deshe... khajna debo kise?" Rooted in the Maratha incursions during the reign of Alivardi Khan, this rhyme compresses an entire economic crisis into four lines: crop loss, taxation, dispossession. "Dhan juralo, pan juralo... ar k'ta din shobur koro, roshun bunechi." A plea for time under extraction. Its logic reappears, centuries later, in Satyajit Ray's *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, where rhyme becomes overt political critique. This continuity is not accidental. It



PHOTO: COLLECTED

to Mughal expansion under Jahangir and campaigns led by Man Singh I, with the "Majumdar" figures positioned as intermediaries. Whether historically exact or not, the rhyme encodes a pattern: proximity to power invites suspicion. Even play preserves critique. Then there is: "Upen ti bioscope, nine ten taisecho, saheb babur boithokkhana..."

reflects the structural capacity of rhyme to carry power relations across time. That capacity was also explored differently by Sukumar Ray in *Abol Tabol*, where nonsense becomes satire, and by Rabindranath Tagore, who collected and analysed children's rhymes as part of a broader cultural inquiry. Later, Annada Shankar Ray would push the form into direct political commentary, proving that brevity need

# NEWS

## A festival of hope and new beginnings

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emperor Akbar, associated with the introduction of the Bangla New Year; the emergence of Bangladesh and the anti-autocracy movement; Gazi's Pat, a traditional visual storytelling technique; and Behula, a key character of the Mangalkavya Manasamangal, among others. The programme will also include performances of the national anthem, Tagore's Esho Hey Baishakh, and patriotic songs by 35 instrumentalists, UNB reported, adding that 200 students will carry a national flag during the procession. Performances by indigenous communities and traditional 'Laathi Khela' will also be featured, organisers added. The procession will begin at 9:00am from the Faculty of Fine Arts and pass Shahbagh, Raju Sculpture, TSC, and Doel Chattar before returning via Bangla Academy. DU authorities have announced strict guidelines, allowing entry only via the Nilkhet and Palashi routes. A cultural programme will also be held at Bakultala on the faculty premises at 4:00pm. Celebrations will begin early, with Chhayanaut's programme at Ramna Batamul at 6:15am and Rishij Shilpigosthi's event in front of Shishu

Park at 7:00am. Traffic restrictions in key areas of the capital will begin from 5:00am, with alternative routes advised. Emergency services, including fire engines, ambulances, medical teams, and naval divers, will remain on standby. Several gates of Suhrawardy Udayan will remain closed during the procession. All campus programmes must end by 5:00pm, after which no one will be allowed to enter. From 7:00pm last night, only vehicles with university stickers or emergency clearance were permitted on campus. Rab will have 308 patrol teams nationwide, while the DMP will deploy SWAT, bomb disposal, K-9, DB, CTC personnel, and mounted police units alongside regular police members. On the eve of the Bangla New Year, Prime Minister Tarique Rahman greeted the nation and Bangla-speaking people worldwide, describing Pahela Baishakh as a unique symbol of Bangalee history, culture, and identity. He said the country's thousand-year-old traditions, folk culture, civilisation, and continuity of values are renewed with the arrival of the new year. Traditional events such as Baishakhi mela, Baishakhi

Shobhajatra, and halkhata reflect the multidimensional beauty of Bangalee culture, he said, adding that the new year brings fresh expectations and possibilities. He also expressed hope that harmony, tolerance, and generosity would strengthen democracy and the coexistence of differing opinions. THE HISTORY Historians trace back the festival's origins to the Mughal era. During emperor Akbar's reign, taxes were collected according to the Islamic lunar calendar, which did not align with agricultural seasons, often forcing farmers to pay before harvests. To address this, Akbar introduced a new calendar system in 1584, later evolving into the Bangla calendar. However, many historians differ. Folk researcher Aminur Rahman Sultan notes that Meghnad Saha, Kashi Prasad Jayaswal, and Amartya Sen link the calendar to Akbar's reign, while Ahmad Sharif argues that Akbar introduced the Tarikh-e-Ilahi, not the Bangla calendar, citing Abul Fazl. A third view traces its origin to the Sultanate period under Husain Shah. Aminur adds that the nawabs of Murshidabad later institutionalised the calendar for administrative use. Yet household celebrations predate

these systems. Traditionally, on the eve of Pahela Baishakh, women soaked rice with water and tender mango twigs. The next morning they performed rituals like 'Amani' to ward off evil and welcome prosperity. With expanding trade, Halkhata (new account books) added a commercial dimension to the festival. Folk performances such as Gambhira, Maljora, Kabigan, Palagan, and Chaitra songs once defined rural celebrations. Today, urban elements like the Baishakh (Mangal) Shobhajatra and symbolic masks blend folk tradition with civic expression. Reflecting on this evolution, Aminur Rahman notes that rural households once celebrated with simple foods like soaked rice, green chillies, onions, and roasted peppers, while hilsa is a later urban addition. During the Pakistan period, when cultural expression faced pressure, the festival gained deeper significance. In 1967, Chhayanaut began welcoming the New Year with music at Ramna Batamul. After independence, the celebration expanded in scale and symbolism. The Faculty of Fine Arts' Shobhajatra, introduced in 1989, added a powerful visual language of resistance, hope, and unity.

## A positive start to build on

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ambassador Humayun Kabir, also president of the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute. Regarding Khalilur's meeting with Ajit Doval, former ambassador M Shafiqullah said the presence of Hasina and thousands of Awami League leaders in India is embarrassing for India. "I think India wants to return the Awami League leaders to Bangladesh," he added. Both analysts welcomed India's positive response to Bangladesh's request for increased diesel and fertiliser supplies amid the Middle East crisis. Jaishankar also indicated that visas — particularly medical and business categories — would be eased in the coming weeks, but the analysts observed that India's resuming of all categories of visas for Bangladeshis would give a strong signal for improving relations, as Bangladesh did so in late February. Khalilur Rahman's remark in this regard was striking. "People to people contact will sustain our relations. If they cannot reach us, you basically deny the important source of trust and confidence," he had told NDTV. Jaishankar had reiterated India's desire to engage constructively with Bangladesh's new government, strengthen bilateral ties, and explore ways to deepen cooperation through existing mechanisms and added that follow-up official meetings are expected soon. The statement said both sides exchanged views on regional and global issues of mutual interest. Shafiqullah described the statement as encouraging but cautioned that the future of the relationship will depend on how sincerely both sides engage and address longstanding concerns. Neither of the statements spoke of several critical issues, including India's trade restrictions, border killings, water sharing, or even India's concerns. One of the vital ones is the renewal of the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty that expires in December this year. In his NDTV interview, Khalilur Rahman had stressed that Bangladesh would like to see a new or revised treaty or arrangement on the Ganges water. Shafiqullah said the Teesta water-sharing deal has remained unsigned, despite being nearly finalised in 2011. So, India needs to take a serious look at the water sharing of the common rivers. Another irritant in the relation is border killing, said Shafiqullah,

adding, "Border management issues can be resolved through dialogue, but loss of life cannot be justified." The statements made no mention of anti-Bangladesh or anti-India rhetoric used, especially during the interim government. Khalilur Rahman had stressed that propaganda from the Indian side concerned the policymakers in Bangladesh deeply and sought to ensure that the narratives are not negative when both sides try to build confidence and trust. According to the Indian newspaper The Economic Times, security cooperation had featured prominently in the India-Bangladesh talks, particularly in the context of cross-border crime and extradition matters. India had also reiterated its position that its territory would not be used for activities against Bangladesh's interests — an assurance that must be welcome for the Bangladesh government, given that Hasina and many other political leaders and activists are now living in India. Shafiqullah said security for northeastern states is a serious issue for India, while another concern is Chinese influence in the region. On this matter, Khalilur Rahman had said Bangladesh's relationship with India or China is not a zero-sum game, while assuring that any worries of India should be put to rest. Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's letter to Indian ruling party BJP National President Nitin Nabin is noteworthy. "This means BNP as a party also wants to build party-level relations with the BJP, keeping in mind that India traditionally favoured Awami League," said M Humayun Kabir. Humayun Kabir said the spirit of the July uprising emphasises that relations with foreign countries should be based on mutual respect and shared interests. The BNP government's foreign policy slogan, "Bangladesh First", reflects a similar approach. He emphasised that Bangladeshis are unlikely to support a return to past patterns where external actors were seen as favouring particular political parties or intervening in domestic affairs. "All in all, the future relationship between the two countries will depend on how India accepts the new realities of Bangladesh and how efficiently Bangladesh can deal with them," said Humayun Kabir.

## 'Fascism's shadow' returning to JS

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the will of 70 percent of the people, honouring the blood of the martyrs, and fulfilling the aspirations of the July fighters." The Jamaat ameer also expressed anger over placing the managing director of Islami Bank Bangladesh PLC on mandatory leave. "After what happened at Bangladesh Bank, a fresh takeover has now begun at the country's largest bank, Islami Bank." He warned that Jamaat would not remain silent if such malpractices continue. He said the struggle is not only for a change in political power but for a fundamental transformation of culture. "Wherever this malpractice exists — be it in banking, the economy, industry, culture, education or the legal system — we will resist it alongside the people." He added, "We do not want to turn our children into anyone's subjects. Nor will we tolerate any family-based rule in Bangladesh in the name of fascism. This vicious cycle in politics

must be broken." Speaking as a special guest, opposition chief whip in parliament and convener of the National Citizen Party (NCP), Nahid Islam, said the issues they had been raising for the past 16 years and during the interim government over the last one and a half years are now forcing them back into discussions and movement again. He alleged that BNP has dragged the nation into the current crisis and will have to bear responsibility for its consequences. Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) President Oli Ahmad said the 11-party alliance must take to the streets step by step, adding that there is no alternative. Political scientist Dilara Chowdhury criticised the home minister's interpretation of the law, saying he avoids addressing the "spirit" of the constitution. "The constitution exists for the people. Laws alone cannot address everything. In many countries, people's will is placed

above written constitutions. By presenting half-truths, the minister is doing something even more dangerous than spreading outright falsehoods." Editor of the daily Amar Desh, Mahmudur Rahman, said those trying to weaken the referendum or raise legal debate around it are questionable in how much they truly uphold the July uprising. Supreme Court senior lawyer and Jamaat central executive council member Mohammad Shishir Monir presented the keynote paper, warning that failure to implement the referendum verdict could push the country into a fresh constitutional and trust crisis. Explaining the reform process, he said a constitutional reform assembly should be convened for 180 days based on the referendum results, followed by the formation of a bicameral parliament. The upper house would consist of 100 members allocated proportionally based on votes. "Failure to undertake this

process will become a disgraceful chapter in history." The seminar was chaired by Ameer of Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis, Mamunul Haque, who said there is no precedent in world history of ignoring a referendum verdict in such a manner. "Do not consign yourselves to the dustbin of history." Brother files case FROM PAGE 12 suspects were identified. Since the incident, police personnel have been deployed at Shamim's house to ensure the family's safety. Police personnel have also been placed since Saturday night at the home of baul singer Shafi Mandol, located about 5km away, amid concerns of further unrest, said OC Arifur. The darbar area, which had been crowded in the days leading up to the attack, remained quiet yesterday, with few outsiders present.