

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Our eids and puja in Azimpur

AHMED AHSANUZZAMAN

In 1970s Azimpur, the two Eids and Durga Puja were the punctuation marks of our year—days when stairwells, verandas, and a single playground turned many flats into one home.

We were colony children—Azimpur children—held together by stairwells, verandas, and a playground that made the whole block feel like an address bigger than any flat number. In the government colony blocks of the 1970s, companionship wasn't a slogan; it was habit. We borrowed salt and stories with equal ease, and when dusk arrived, a dozen doors stayed ajar as if belonging itself required cross-ventilation. The ordinary days were ruled by school bells and marble games, but the calendar's truest punctuation marks were the two Eids and Durga Puja. Those were the days the colony breathed in unison and then laughed out loud.

Ramadan redrew the afternoons. By late Asr, the playground quietly became our operations room. Boys and



PHOTO: COLLECTED

This day I miss the confident architecture of companionship—the way doorways conspired to stay open, the way radios in different flats tuned into the same song and made the air itself a chorus, the way festivals adjusted our sense of “we” until it could comfortably include anyone who arrived with a good wish.

girls fanned out to collect dry leaves, fallen branches, and sometimes a used tyre finally retired from service by an indulgent father. We built our little bonfire pyramid beside the boundary wall and then waited for what mattered most: the Shawwal moon. At Maghrib the whole block turned into an ear. First came snatches of news—someone's uncle had heard from an office clerk that the crescent might be visible—then, most important of all, the radio. We waited for Kazi Nazrul Islam's immortal song, “O mon, Ramzaner ei rojar sheshe”, to arrive like permission. The first lift of the melody felt as if the colony's heartbeat had

found a higher gear.

If the moon was sighted, we became a small orchestra. A match skimmed along a twig; the pile caught; sparks leapt like impatient birds. We clapped, we shouted, we promised each other to wake before dawn and then recommitted to the promise five minutes later. If the crescent refused us, we drooped together; even the tyre looked embarrassed. But our disappointment never lasted longer than a night. By the next afternoon we gathered again, as if patience itself were part of our Ramadan syllabus. In that waiting we learned time's soft discipline, a lesson that continues to serve when adult life feels like a queue that won't move.

Eid-ul-Fitr arrived like a holiday you could smell—attar and new cotton, the faint starch of freshly ironed panjabis, the sweetness travelling on platters from flat to flat. We woke before the sun, bath-fresh and shivery with importance, pulled on new clothes slowly to make the moment last, and set off for prayers. Sometimes we walked to the eidgah in a cousinly convoy; sometimes we chose the nearest mosque. The morning light did a kind thing to faces; every salaam seemed to carry a little extra lift.

After prayers, we became citizens of the colony's republic of joy. Doorways pulled us in; courtyards stitched us together; the word “come” functioned less as an invitation than as a statement of fact. And then came the magic of salami. Khalammas and khalus pressed one taka, two taka into our hands with a gravity that said, “Use this well.” It was quite some money. We counted, re-counted, and planned purchases that changed flavour every 15 minutes. Even our parents' salami felt different, as if it had been minted by the morning itself.

Evening carried its own magnetism: a neighbour with a television. Chairs were summoned from rooms; cousins camped on the floor; someone always ended up on the windowsill; elders perfected the art of leaning against the doorframe without surrendering their balance. If it was the Eid when Amzad Hossain's new drama in the *Jobbar Ali* sequel aired, a hush descended that rivalled prayer. The adults laughed on the beat; we children learned the beat and joined one laugh later. The next morning the playground glittered with new catchphrases as if the TV had minted a private currency we spent freely on jokes.

Eid-ul-Adha added the serious music

of sacrifice to the carnival. We woke early to help where we were allowed—carrying bowls, fetching water, delivering messages across stairwells, tidying the corridor when elders needed room for their quietly choreographed work. There was solemnity but never fear. By afternoon, the colony smelled of home cooking in a dozen accents of the same dish. “Come taste” became a task we completed with civic pride. The evening's television gathering felt earned—laughter wrapped around tired satisfaction.

Durga Puja belonged to us with the quiet certainty of habit. It never occurred to us to think of it as “someone else's” festival. There were two Hindu families in our block; during the five days of Puja we became their honorary cousins. Their living rooms filled with our chatter; our cheeks powdered with naru and bright with sandesh; our hands sticky with fruit syrup; our eyes set to alert for the small differences that made other people's customs so delicious. The happiness was not borrowed; it was shared, and therefore multiplied.

School closed for Puja and the Dhakeswari Temple stood less than a kilometre away—near enough to feel

CREATIVE NONFICTION

The flavours of Eid and the memory of home

ANINDITA ROY

This year, both Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha came as they should, celebrated across many countries. Yet while joy filled some homes, in others it arrived with a heavy heart.

Before I knew anything about geopolitics, I knew the taste of Eid. For me, the word Eid still carries me back to my earliest memories of Eid in Dhaka. Those memories are sweet, both metaphorically and literally.

We lived on Rankin Street in Wari in a modest three-storey building where the landlord occupied the second floor, my family lived on the first, and two other families lived on the ground floor. On Eid morning, I would wake up to the smell of semolina fried in ghee for making halwa or shemai simmering in milk. I would wait eagerly for the tray, always hidden beneath a pristine white cloth, carrying bowls of shemai and halwa—those quintessential Eid sweets studded with pistachios, almonds, and kishmish.

The greatest treat of all was the tray that arrived from our landlord's home just before lunch. Even now, I think of his wife, whom we called Khalamma, as one of the finest cooks I have ever known. She sent over aromatic pulao with a taste so distinctive that I have spent years failing to find it again, in restaurants or in my own kitchen. Alongside it came mutton rezala, tender meat still clinging to the bone, bathed in a pearly white gravy with a golden

Rice, meat, and vegetables take on yet another dimension when Nour, from Palestine, cooks maqluba, the celebrated upside-down rice dish, for Eid. The sight of a perfectly turned maqluba brightened Nour's face.

hue, a sheen of oil on top, and dried red chillies drifting across the surface. It was perfectly spiced, though never fiery. There was also jhal murgi, a spicy chicken curry that balanced the fragrance and sweetness of the pulao. Khalamma had magical hands.



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

After Durga Puja, trays would also leave our home, carrying bowls of labra, luchi, and coconut sweets. Their flavours were distinctly different, as were the methods of cooking them. In Bangladesh, Hindu and Muslim culinary traditions share certain basic ingredients—rice, freshwater fish, dal, and seasonal produce—yet they diverge in technique and seasoning. Dal, bhaat, vegetables, and fish form shared culinary grammar that predates and survives borders, partitions and communal anxieties. Yet families of different faiths, even while living side by side, usually kept their cooking practices within the boundaries of their own kitchens. That too was part of the beauty of that world. It taught us to recognise and value differences through food. Eid and Puja were both woven into the social rhythm of my life in Bangladesh. Food crossed thresholds, and distinctions between religions did not need to be explained. It carried coexistence, familiarity,

and belonging to that world.

Early in my adult life, I had the chance to taste Eid food in Kolkata at the home of my grandaunt, my father's aunt, Gauri Ayyub. She was married to Abu Sayeed Ayyub, who came from an Urdu-speaking family in Kolkata. That meal revealed to me how different Eid could taste just across the border. The generosity and hospitality that mark festive Muslim cooking everywhere was familiar, yet the character of the meal was distinct from the Eid food I had grown up with in Bangladesh. In Kolkata, the dishes were influenced by Indo-Persian, North Indian culinary traditions. In Bangladesh, Eid food remained more deeply rooted in the textures, ingredients, and flavours of Bengal.

Eid acquired a wider meaning for me when I moved to Europe. It was no longer confined to the festival I had known in Dhaka and later encountered in Kolkata. Through friends and neighbours in diaspora communities, I

came to know what people ate in Afghanistan, what was served on Palestinian tables, and the distinct taste of the Iranian celebration. The festival remained recognisable, but the food did not. Some ingredients and customs overlapped, yet each cuisine carried its own history, landscape, and memory. Food revealed both kinship and difference.

My Iranian friend Mahsa prepared her Eid table amid uncertainty in her homeland and opened her home to us so that we too could be part of the festival. The fragrance and subtle sweetness of zereshk polo, which reminded me of the berry pulao of Parsi cuisine, seemed to lift the fear that had settled over us. It was made with the same basmati rice we use for pulao or biryani, yet its flavour was different. It was accompanied by joojeh kabab, chicken delicately infused with saffron and other simple seasonings. The meal was not only a feast for the palate, the colours on the plate

were a feast for the eyes as well.

My generation learned about Afghanistan, its rich culture, and its hospitality through Syed Mujtaba Ali's *Deshe Bideshe* (1948). Afghanistan has changed since Mujtaba Ali chronicled his travels there. Yet the generosity and hospitality associated with its people remained intact. Our Afghan friend Sina prepares kabuli pulao and kulcha khatai, a kind of shortbread biscuit, to share with us at Eid. The vibrant orange of glistening carrots and the golden yellow of raisins scattered over chunks of tender lamb and fluffy basmati rice awakened our senses immediately. We ended our delectable meal with sheer chai, a traditional Afghan milk tea, and homemade kulcha khatai that melted in our mouths.

Rice, meat, and vegetables take on yet another dimension when Nour, from Palestine, cooks maqluba, the celebrated upside-down rice dish, for Eid. The sight of a perfectly turned maqluba brightened Nour's face, and for a moment she seemed to forget the pain that the people in her country are currently enduring.

Each of these cuisines is distinct, carrying its own heritage. The ingredients may often be similar, but together they tell a larger human story. We are alike in many ways, yet also different, and that difference should be celebrated.

This, too, is what Eid has come to mean to me—not only a cherished memory of my home in Bangladesh but something far larger: a wonderful example of an enduring bond among human beings. Through food, I have come to understand how celebration travels across borders while remaining rooted in place, how hospitality survives displacement, how ritual can hold both joy and sorrow all at once.

For Nour, Sina, and Mahsa, Eid has unfolded under the shadow of grief. Yet they still cooked, celebrated, and gathered, because grief can make such rituals feel even more necessary than ever. In sharing their food, they were offering not only hospitality, but an example of endurance. I can only hope that the next Eid will be more joyful, more peaceful, and more hopeful.

Anindita Roy is a public health specialist working with an international organisation in Geneva, Switzerland.