



# RHYTHMS OF RESISTANCE: INVESTIGATING LATHIKHELA'S INFLUENCE ON BANGLADESH'S ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

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## ABSTRACT

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*Exploring the pivotal history of Lathi and Lathikhela, as well as the relationship between socio-economic impact and development in the Lathials, is the primary goal of this current research. Economic development is not the most crucial factor for lathials, according to this study. Social recognition is. The purpose of this research is to learn more about Lathikhela's past so that we can preserve its traditions and the social and economic advantages that the Lathials enjoyed. Qualitative research methods are employed in the study. In 2021 and 2022, researchers used observational methods and interviews with 150 lathials. This study's findings reveal that Lathials receive substantial social acceptance and recognition and small monetary benefits during national festivals such as Pohela Boishakh, Mohorrom, and the paddy harvesting season. According to this research, most Lathials play the game for fun and personal growth rather than for financial gain. Lathikhela is also not yet recognized as part of Bangladesh's official cultural heritage, according to another discovery. Lastly, the research identifies several essential elements, such as the Lathials' and the villagers' social orientation, festival mood, entertainment, and community bondage.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Socio-economic development, Pohela Boishakh, Mohorrom, community bondage, entertainment, social orientation, history of Lathikhela*

## INTRODUCTION

The origins of the self-defense practice, physical conditioning, and offensive techniques of Lathi can be traced back to the Char region of East Pakistan, characterized by its sandy terrain adjacent to a river. During that period, the vassals strongly desired to demonstrate their physical prowess to safeguard their survival against the feudal system. To demonstrate their power and safeguard themselves against various challenges, they began employing a variety of weapons such as Lathi, lori, shield, arrow and bow, and sword. It was also apparent that both males and females began acquiring proficiency in using Lathi (Source: Lathi-Lori-Shorki, 1973). The practice of Lathi is observed in various regions of India, including Bihar, Lucknow, Bhojpur, Delhi, Birvoo, and Chandannagar. During

that primitive era, individuals would employ a lathi to safeguard themselves against untamed and fierce creatures. In the past, people used lathis to self-defense against formidable creatures such as the pole vault, which facilitated their ability to leap longer and higher distances. This incident clearly demonstrates that the lathials had complete control over the poll volt. It is evident from various historical sources, including Wikipedia Bangladesh, that the origin of the Lathi can be traced back to Bangladesh. The Iron Age commences immediately following the Stone Age. During the Iron Age, foreign nations began producing various types of iron weaponry and incorporating them into their daily lives and economies. However, those individuals from other countries utilized weapons made of iron with the assistance of a lathi. It is well-known

that our country does not produce iron but is a natural producer of bamboo, cane, and wood lathi. Due to the abundant availability of these lathies in our country, we have begun utilizing them to create weapons. Historical records indicate that using Lathi as a weapon originated in Bangladesh. The Mughals and Pathans were subjected to multiple invasions by Western nations. During that period, no Western warrior wielded a lathi; instead, they used swords, arrows, bows, and other weapons made of iron. Western warriors typically engaged in combat against the ruling dynasty of baro bhuiyan (12 bhuiyan) in Bangla. Historical records indicate that both King Easha Kha and Emperor Akbar's esteemed warrior, Man-Singh, were known to have engaged in battles against English troops. Another prominent instance is the bamboo fortress constructed by Titoomir, who valiantly resisted the English forces using only a traditional wooden staff known as a lathi.

In the past, individuals from previous generations would engage in various forms of lathi movements, which required them to possess a robust physique. Consequently, they were not easily intimidated and were able to defend themselves against English invasions. During that period, the British government deliberately prohibited various forms of lathikhela clubs by enacting laws against them. Additionally, they accused the lathials of being criminals, such as dacoits and thieves, within society. However, the English troops were unable to subdue the lathials. The Lathials staged a rebellion against the English colonizers, utilizing lathis as their primary weapon, and their revolt was characterized by its intensity and severity. It is indisputable that certain weapons, such as pistols and rifles, are not accessible or permissible for all individuals to possess and bear. When it comes to safeguarding the general population, Lathi can be considered the optimal option due to its unrestricted use in society. Lathials were significant contributors to the advancement of economic endeavors in the feudal era (Lathi Khelar Koushol,1981). The Lathi once symbolized rebellion or uprising during the feudal era when the kings had complete authority to command all the lathials as they pleased. Vassals were typically the tenants of kings, cultivating land in exchange for their servitude. Kings typically leased all of their land to vassals with the expectation that they would fulfill their orders. Vassals actively contributed to the economic development by producing crops and other essential goods. The lathials were tasked with gathering and storing all the crops in the king's warehouse.

In the present era, it is rare to witness the presence of lathials wielding their formidable lathis to demonstrate against any form of disturbance. Following the Second

World War, people were more inclined towards weapons such as pistols, rifles, and shotguns. However, individuals who had a deep affection for and were skilled in the use of Lathi and those who were passionate about it continue to find avenues to demonstrate the knowledge and expertise passed down to them by their forefathers. In pursuit of this transformation, the nature of Lathi has shifted from being rebellious to becoming an art form. The inaugural Lathikhela Club was established in 1933 under the name of Nikhil Bongo Lathial Association. It was founded by Khandokar Ismail Hossain, who assumed the role of president, and Sirajul Haque Chowdhury (Ostad Bhai), who was appointed as secretary. Following Bangladesh's independence in 1972, the name "Bangladesh Lathial Bahini" was bestowed upon the organization. Sirajul Haque Chowdhury, the secretary, was entrusted with all the responsibilities. The study encompasses a comprehensive context, where the researcher has diligently gathered all pertinent information to create a valuable research paper for future stakeholders. Nevertheless, this study aims to examine the socio-economic consequences on the daily life of lathials and explore the present state of Lathikhela as a cultural heritage site in Bangladesh.

## **RATIONALE OF THE STUDY**

Lathikhela is a distinctive heritage of Bangladesh, renowned for its rich historical significance dating back to ancient times. Since the British era, the Lathi has been the exclusive weapon used to defend our oppressed population. We possess numerous instances such as Titumir's Bamboo Fort, Easha Kha, the illustrious emperor Akbar, and his esteemed soldier Mann Singh, all engaged in combat against the British emperor with the assistance of Lathi. Lathikhela holds a significant position in the hearts of people, particularly those residing in rural areas, in the present day. During various festivals such as Pohela Boishakh, Mohorrom, and the Paddy Harvesting season, villagers enthusiastically partake in Lathikhela, which is regarded as the main recreational event. During the Lathikhela, both men and women of various ages would partake in the show, fostering greater interpersonal connections and bonds among them. Unfortunately, despite being a heritage, lathikhela has not received much attention, and no significant research has been conducted in this prestigious field. Another concern is the lack of prior investigation into the financial yield generated by playing Lathi and the unidentified social impact on the lathials. It should be noted that in our materialistic society, individuals are inclined to seek recreational activities or entertainment from any available events. Lathikhela is widely

regarded as a prominent event that contributes significantly to providing entertainment and recreation for the general public. In rural areas, festivals such as Pohela Boishakh, Mohorrom, and the paddy harvesting season are celebrated with lathikhela. This event aims to entertain the local population, attracting thousands of both men and women who come together to enjoy the festivities. Lathikhela primarily occurs in the evening, attracting a larger audience because most attendees are day laborers. In rural areas, this sport is regarded as the primary recreational activity that attracts people of all ages and genders, regardless of their background, to come and enjoy the spectacle.

Recognizing the importance of addressing this pressing issue, the researcher aims to bridge this gap by conducting a pragmatic research study on the impact of Lathikhela on the social and economic development of the lathials.

### SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

The scope of this study encompasses the different villages of Kushtia (formerly known as Nadia) and Jhenaidah. Kushtia, particularly Amla Sodor, Khalishakundo, Pipulbaria, Trimohoni, Poradah, Bollovpur, Hathgopalpur, Allah ar Dorga, Kolabaria, Mojompur, Badhbazar, Sheikhpara, and Pantee, were once renowned locations for lathials. However, in the case of Jhenaidah, specifically in the areas of Shoilokopa, Vatoi, Dudhshor, and Shantidanga, experienced and young Lathials are relied upon to collect pertinent data and information for this study. A total of 150 lathials from these two districts were interviewed. The scope of this research will primarily encompass these areas, particularly through visits to experienced lathials who possess extensive expertise and in-depth knowledge of lathikhela. This study collected data from the aforementioned lathials, focusing on various aspects such as the historical background of lathikhela, the advantages it offers, the socio-economic effects on lathials, the rules and regulations governing lathikhela, its role in tax collection for the monarchy, its contribution to wealth preservation, methods of providing entertainment, strategies for establishing it as a national sport, and ultimately, how lathikhela can preserve the cultural heritage of Bangladesh. However, the demise of certain experienced lathials may result in a lack of sufficient information to effectively carry out this research.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Lathikhela is a longstanding cultural heritage of Bangladesh that has undergone various transformations over time and across generations. Sir Robert Baden Powell asserted in 1899 and 1901 that the Lathi is the

optimal means of safeguarding humanity, as it lacks the detrimental consequences associated with other weapons such as cannons, atomic bombs, or nuclear weapons. He provided the boys' scout team with lathis for the first time. The esteemed researcher, Dr. Kazi Motahar Hossein (Kazi.M. Hossain, 1960), states that he personally engages in the practice of Lathi to maintain his physical and mental well-being. In an article published in his newspaper, Dainik Azad, in 1961, Moulana Akram Kha asserted that regular practice of Lathi will enhance physical strength and enable individuals to defend themselves against any wrongdoer.

In his book 'The History of Arab Nation,' Moulavi Kazi Sheikh Riazuddin Ahmed (M.K.S. Riazuddin, 1955) mentioned that the bedouins and caravans used lathis as a means of self-defense against invasions and other troublemakers.

In his work "Nakshi Kathar Math" published in 1928, the renowned poet Jashimuddin acknowledged the lathials as heroic figures during the British era. He highlighted the story of Rupai, a lathial who bravely prevented hooligans from looting paddy in Gafargaon. Rupai's actions aimed to safeguard the honor of his village and protest against the disorderly behavior of the miscreants. Thus, Rupai, as a lathial, was compelled to engage in combat.

In his article titled "Lathials: Tax Collectors and Dispute Settlers" (Islam Sirajul, 2015, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh), Sirajul Islam discusses how lathials were employed by zamindars to collect taxes and resolve disputes.

Sirajul Islam (Islam Sirajul, 2015, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh) noted that lathikhela and lathials are gradually disappearing in Bangladesh, although they have not completely vanished.

In his article, Simon Zakaria (also known as Jakaria, Saimon) asserts that participants in Lathikhela, an event during the Eid Festival, receive modest financial compensation but are primarily motivated by social recognition and a deep passion for the event.

In his book "Lathi-Lori-Shorki," published in 1973, S. Haque Chowdhury stated that Lathikhela plays a crucial role in stimulating economic activities in the area, as it leads to the operation of village fairs and shops during the event.

### METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

The current research primarily focuses on qualitative methodologies, with a particular emphasis on

examining how the socio-economic status of lathials' families has improved. Qualitative research primarily aims to delve into profound insights regarding real-world issues. Qualitative research is commonly employed in the fields of social science, humanities, anthropology, education, health science, and history. Qualitative analysis involves the observation of substances in their natural state without any interference with their normal activities (Newman et al., 1998). Hence, the utilization of qualitative research is the most suitable approach for the objective of this study. The research primarily centers on two research methods: observation and interview. These methods serve as crucial tools for conducting qualitative research. The observation method is appropriate for mitigating respondent bias in behavior (Dunckel, 2015). According to the Institute of Work and Health (2015), observational approaches are primarily employed to study the effects of various factors, such as risks, investigative actions, tests, or interventions, without interfering with the changes that may or may not be exposed to them.

The purpose of this study is to present the results using a narrative approach to analyze the observed data. Narrative studies are most suitably employed in social sciences, particularly in fields such as gender studies, observational studies, and organizational studies. Nevertheless, narrative studies are intricately connected to the examination of personal life experiences and biographical accounts. Narrative studies primarily involve a qualitative analysis approach that focuses on comprehending the human experience through stories or narratives. The researcher employs narrative methodologies to uncover recurring authentic information from the participants (McAlpine, 2016). Narrative approaches are employed to examine real-life problems or difficulties. In their study, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggested that qualitative research using the narrative method can employ two distinct tactics. First, ascertain the specific research inquiry that aligns precisely with the narrative research being conducted. Then, gather the pertinent details and accurate resolutions or responses to the examined events. Secondly, the aim is to assess the participants' responses and the underlying context that gives rise to their reflections while also elucidating the elements of the narrative or events.

## **PRESENT STATUS OF LATHIKHELA IN BANGLADESH**

Bangladesh is renowned for its rich cultural and historical legacy. The foundation of culture and heritage was established during the early Mughal era. In Bangladeshi culture, festivals and sports are

intricately intertwined and can be regarded as an indispensable component of our nation. According to data from heimduo.org, 61.82% of the population in Bangladesh resides in rural areas. This majority population has a significant impact on the country's overall culture, as it reflects the living patterns and cultural practices of the villagers. Lathikhela is a highly popular sport in rural areas of Bangladesh. Lathikhela is a sport that originated in Bangladesh and has been established as a recognized sport (Source: Wikipedia Bangladesh). The occurrence of Lathikhela escalates particularly during festive occasions such as Pohela Boishakh, Mohorrom, the paddy harvesting season, and national events like National Victory Day and Independence Day. In Bangladesh, Lathikhela is predominantly observed in districts such as Kushtia, Jhinaidah, Magura, Narail, Tangail, Shirajgonj, Rongpur, Joshore, Meherpur, Chuadanga, Natore, and Mymensingh. Kushtia is a district that has been at the forefront of training, organizing, and promoting Lathikhela on an annual basis. Located in Kushtia, there exists a well-organized and formal institution called Bangladesh Lathial Bahini, which was established in 1933. The late Sirajul Haque Chowdhury, widely known as Ostad Bhai, was the founding president of this organization. The Bangladesh Lathial Bahini serves as a central organization for all the lathials in the various districts. The Bangladesh Lathial Bahini consists of over 2000 enlisted lathials, with 200 of them being female. This organization collects all the lathials annually, particularly during the winter season, in an event called Lathikhela Utsob. Typically, a three-day program is organized where all the lathials participate with their respective teams. In addition to other festivals, such as Pohela Boishakh, Lathikhela is widely observed in various areas of Bangladesh. Various organizations commemorate Pohela Boishakh by organizing Lathikhela, as it is closely linked to our rural cultural traditions. Typically, government officials and village leaders organize a full-day Lathikhela event at a significant venue, allowing a large number of people to witness and enjoy the spectacle. Upon the conclusion of the event, lathials are bestowed with a monetary remuneration, or alternatively, they may receive non-monetary incentives.

During the paddy harvesting season, the villagers often engage in the tradition of organizing Lathikhela festivities at night. It has been observed that lathials, who are primarily peasants, store paddy in their warehouses during the harvesting season with the expectation of making a substantial profit from selling these crops. Furthermore, it has been discovered that during significant national occasions such as

Independence Day or Victory Day, government officials extend invitations to lathials in order to showcase their talents and artistic abilities for the purpose of entertaining the public.

**BACKGROUND OF LATHIKHELA AS THE HERITAGE OF BANGLADESH**

The focus of this research is the 'History of Lathikhela' and its impact on the heritage and socio-economic conditions of the Lathials. It is widely recognized that lathikhela is an ancient event with its roots in Bangladesh (Source: Banglapedia website). Bangladesh takes great pride in the early adoption of lathikhela in our region. The primary motivation for the researcher is to investigate and uncover factual information about lathikhela, with the intention of accurately disseminating it to the general public. Japan, like other countries, possesses a distinctive cultural legacy known as the Samurai, which has been preserved and upheld since 1392 until the present day (Source: Wikipedia, Britannica). The Samurai sword is regarded as a significant emblem of authentic heritage, and the Japanese government is taking extensive measures to safeguard this heritage from potential extinction in the future. In order to safeguard this cultural legacy, the Japanese government has implemented subsidies for individuals who can trace their lineage back to Samurai sword craftsmen. The Japanese government's initiative has demonstrated the significant importance of preserving cultural heritage, and they are determined to protect it by all means possible. Similar to Japan, Bangladesh has the chance to preserve its cultural heritage by promoting the lathikhela. Bangladesh should take pride in declaring that Lathikhela is the quintessential heritage of their country. The origin of protection in human history can be traced back to the use of Lathi, which is why the holy Qur'an states that "everything will be returned to its origin." Despite possessing cutting-edge weaponry in the modern era, it

is inevitable that we will eventually revert back to our origins, relying on the humble Lathi. This notion is supported by Albert Einstein, who famously predicted that "after the third world war, the fourth world war would be fought with lathis." He elaborated that in the event of a third world war, atomic energy would be deployed on a global scale, resulting in the destruction of all weapons. As a last resort, the Lathi (a type of staff or baton) would be used for protection. This research aims to preserve the cultural heritage of lathikhela in Bangladesh and document it in the country's history book. By doing so, the research seeks to ensure the continuity of this heritage, which plays a significant role in defining the national identity. Countries possessing distinctive cultural heritage serve as a constant source of inspiration for their citizens, enabling them to showcase their heritage on a global scale. Bangladesh is fortunate to possess this cultural heritage, which can aid in establishing a distinct national identity in the global consciousness.

**INVESTIGATION OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE LATHIALS' HOUSEHOLD**

Based on the observations and interviews, it has been determined that lathials engage in lathi play primarily for personal satisfaction, with monetary gain being of little importance. The majority of lathials often contribute their own funds to participate in various events across different regions. Lathikhela is a team-oriented sport that is overseen by a team leader. Typically, a team is comprised of 10-15 lathials. The investigator discovered that when the event is organized in a foreign country, the subsequent estimated costs can be observed. A team of 10 members from Lathial is traveling from Jhenaidah to Kushtia to take part in an event.

Sl.	Particulars	Cost (BDT)
1.	Transportation cost by bus per person up-down (300tk×10 person)	3000
2.	Food and refreshment (200tk×10 person)	2000
3.	First aid (100tk×10 person)	1000
4.	Playing instruments (200tk×10 person)	2000
5.	Miscellaneous (100tk×10 person)	1000
	TOTAL	9000/=

Source: Author

Based on the given information, it can be inferred that each team has a total cost of BDT 9000. Based on the interview and observation, the researcher discovered that lathials are given a small amount of money by the organizer solely for covering transportation expenses. Therefore, each lathial team operates in the form of a subsidy. Each team member bears the remaining cost of

3500 taka. The investigator also discovered that lathials engage in various events primarily driven by self-interest, personal satisfaction, and a strong passion for Lathikhela.

An essential factor motivating lathials to engage in lathi play is the acknowledgment they receive from society, as stated by Ostad Sher Kha, an 84-year-old veteran

lathial in 2022. This statement clearly indicates that Lathikhela is a personal interest rather than a career. Their passion compels them to journey to far-flung locations to partake in various events. Another seasoned lathial, Ostad Tipu Kha(2022), who is currently 82 years old, emphasized that Lathikhela is deeply ingrained in his being, and he continues to keep a lathi by his bedside as he sleeps. These statements indicate that Lathikhela is their primary passion rather than a means of earning. Tanzil, a young member of the Pipulbaria Lathial team, stated that he participates in Lathi because he was inspired by his father, who also played Lathi. He aims to carry on his father's legacy. This statement further highlights that lathials primarily choose this sport due to the importance placed on legacy and social recognition. Ruponty Chowdhury, a renowned figure among female lathials, has been honored by numerous national and international organizations. She attributes her expertise in Lathikhela to her ancestors and aims to pass on this legacy to future generations. She emphasizes that while earning money is not the primary concern, gaining social recognition is of utmost importance.

## OUTCOMES

Based on the aforementioned analysis, the researcher has determined that there is no discernible direct correlation in terms of economic advantage for the lathials. Another significant discovery is that Lathials primarily engage in lathi play for the purpose of social recognition, passion, and self-interest.

## FINAL REMARKS

The Bangladeshi population is highly focused on their culture and consistently engages in cultural activities year-round. Lathikhela plays a substantial role in the rural sector, particularly in promoting social development and enhancing cultural enrichment. However, the investigation reveals that lathials primarily engage in Lathi for the purpose of social recognition, driven by their passion, and, in certain instances, to uphold the heritage of their forefathers. Bangladesh is credited as the originator of Lathikhela, having introduced it to the general public, thus establishing its historical significance in the country. Additionally, the investigation revealed that lathials may not directly derive economic benefits from participating in Lathi but rather from other activities such as village fairs. These fairs typically revolve around the event and generate financial transactions for the villagers. During the event of Lathikhela, the villagers experience an indirect improvement in their overall economic development.

In Bangladesh, Lathikhela has not yet been officially acknowledged as a cultural heritage. As a result of this lack of recognition, people appear to be hesitant or uninterested in engaging in that profession. Nevertheless, Lathikhela has the potential to become the vanguard of Bangladesh's cultural heritage, thereby enabling our nation to showcase its legacy on the global stage. Bangladesh has the potential to establish Lathikhela as an international heritage, similar to Japan's renowned heritage of the Samurai.

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