

Baishakh at the Wake of Covid 19

SOHANA MANZOOR

It all started with someone responding to a Facebook post on Coronavirus—wishing that all the problems would be over before the *Pahela Baishakh*, situation would return to normal, and we would be able to celebrate the Bengali New Year at *Ramna Botomul*. I had been watching the Magnificent Century, the famous Turkish TV series on YouTube for quite sometime, and after reading the post my immediate response was, “Ameen.” Then I squirmed in embarrassment. There was no way we could have a regular *Pahela Baishakh* in 2020. It was definitely gone in the wake of COVID-19. With the world facing a pandemic with the entire country quarantined, who would be even thinking of celebrating the occasion? Some zealous ones might invite a few friends over and have a semblance of the auspicious day with hilsha curry, five instead of ten different types of *bhorta* (due to scarcity of vegetables), and other delicacies. Assuredly, I am not so brave, hence in all probability, I will stay at home and sleep (which I have done on *Eid-ul-Adhas* all through my teenage years).

But then I have a problem. As the Literary Editor of The Daily Star, I usually produce a page celebrating *Pahela Baishakh* at this time of the year. Usually, I also ask some of our writers to write for the Baishakhi issue. This year, however, the entire focus has been on an unwelcome and uninvited guest who has diminished our regular programs and activities at all levels. Like everybody else, I too, had been worried over life and death, about safety and sanctity. I do not know if the situation will change drastically in another week, but right now, the corona situation seems to be in better shape in Bangladesh than the rest of the world. But from what I see on Facebook, I feel bad for my housebound students and younger cousins, worse for their parents who suddenly find their children a handful. Some female friends and colleagues are not sure what to do with the character called “husband” who is suddenly at home all the time and acting like an oversized puppy, or worse, an overgrown teenager. Everybody is posting crazy stuff on the social media. Some are hooting like unknown animals, a few screeching like nocturnal birds, and I even saw a video clip that showed someone who had hung a swing in his bedroom, the ceiling fan resting on the floor. People surely are experimenting and have ample time to do so. Having watched these for more than a week, I found myself wondering if COVID does not have some other side effects beside cough and fever.

Anyway, thoughts on the occasion of *Pahela Baishakh* sent me rummaging through my email and Facebook inboxes. I came across cautionary messages, video clips and jokes on COVID-19. By the tenth day of the quarantine, I have had at least three messages that claimed Coronavirus as bogus and encouraged people to fight it by taking a long trip. The very idea sent a cold shiver down my spine because the worst that can actually happen for us is to resume our regular activities and thus help spread the virus. We have already observed what has happened in China, Italy, Iran, and finally, in the US. Many claimed that the virus was in check and then the number of the victims just doubled and tripled within weeks. And still some actually are thinking that it is a mere plaything and people are overreacting?

My inspection of the inboxes also disclosed something else. I knew that Bengalis are emotional people and they write poems on all occasions. Now that they are stuck at home with Corona knocking on the door, things have taken a totally new direction, albeit not unexpected. Many have become prolific poets. Believe it or not, I have not come across such a variety of verses in my entire life and all address the same muse—COVID-19 or Coronavirus. And since they cannot directly address their muse, they leave these at my doorstep with no mercy for this poor editor.

As I was wallowing in self-pity and wondering how to deal with this massive body of “poetry,” I received a phone call from my part-time *chhutabua* whom I have told not to come until the quarantine period is over. The poor girl sounded terrified and I asked, “What has happened? Are you ill? Are your children okay?” In reply she said that they were all fine. But she had a problem.

“Aunty, are you sure you don’t need help? My mother said I should go to work, otherwise, I might lose my job.”

I yelled at the top of my voice, “Have you gone mad? You want to be beaten by the police or something? For God’s sake stay at home and don’t get out. Do you need money?”

She sobbed, “No, I have money. But ma said....” “Forget about your ma. Just stay at home,” I said firmly with a hint of steel.

After talking to her I sat before my laptop shaking my head over the problem of *buas*. Next came another call from our old *bua* in Muktagachha. She had left us a few years back and currently resides with her daughter’s family.

“Afa,” she said sobbing. “Afa, we are in poor



shape. My son-in-law is sitting at home for the past eight days. No work. And no money. They’re beating up people in the streets. Can you send us some money? Otherwise, we’ll starve.”

I was dumbstruck for a while. Yes, I read the news and saw pictures of workers lying with their baskets and tools. The lockdown has effectively locked people in their houses, and hopefully, the virus too? But no work means no food. There have been a few random incidents when distributing relief too— the have-nots beating up the ones that did get relief, or the regular irregularities in the system that allowed only the “known faces” to get the rationed food. The supply is indeed inadequate considering the number of people.

I have been ordering grocery items online but as

the orders arrive, I discover that many of the items are missing. I have been taking note of my stock of boxes of rice, noodles, coffee and other items in the kitchen. And I am worried. But honestly, the trouble I am facing is insignificant compared to what is out there. We are missing out one or two items like cilantro or bread. We feel restless and we are bored. We are writing bad poetry and mediocre prose. We are exercising this and that. I am writing this piece on the tenth day of the lockdown. For me, it means I am working from home. I am teaching online. I am writing for the newspaper online and all these guarantee that I am going to get my paycheck at the end of the month. For a vast majority of the people, however, that is not the scenario. They work on a day-to-day basis; they eat from hand to mouth. Boredom is the least of the issues here. If measures are not taken right away, we will see people dying on the streets. But maybe we won’t because we are all quarantined at home and we have social media to entertain ourselves.

The sky that I see through my window is cloudless and blue. The lockdown seems to have its positive effects too—the air is clean and the surroundings peaceful. If this was a regular year, I would be getting ready for the *Pahela Baishakh* with new sarees and preparation of different kinds of food. But now my mouth is parched, my throat dry. I cannot sing but mutter the lines:

“*Muchhe jaak glani, ghuche jaak jora* (let weariness dissolve, let decrepit age begone)

Ognisnane shuchi houk dhor!” (Bathed in fire, let the earth be purified).

The only problem is *ognisnan* is a fearful process. In mythical stories, only the pure survived the ordeal of fire. And those that did, faced even more appalling situations. A friend of mine recently reminded me cheerfully that the European Renaissance came at the wake of the Great Bubonic Plague—the Black Death. So, we should feel hopeful. Perhaps, the quarantine is a good time to analyse and comprehend our inner spirits and that might lead to a new beginning. Nevertheless, right now the concern is more about how terrifying the fire storms are going to be and how many of us will survive it. And those that will, what will they find in a world where all the previously known order might have gone awry?

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POETRY

shanti, the playboy of satkhira

(to kaiser haq, william carlos williams & queen)

MD MEHEDI HASAN

Based on a true story (...poets, as everybody knows, are not to be entirely trusted!)

i. shanti in his deathbed

death is more capricious than bangladesh railway, doctor. have you ever listened to ‘bohemian rhapsody’ just after having the second orgasm in a row?

i am not so aesthetic as you in sexual activities, mr shanti.

escapes are exigent from this valley of the shadow of death, i fear chaos: for no one’s with me. you treat cancer i’m suffering from it i can sense— it’s near so leave me to be the same hedonist i am

ii. sweet satkhira accent

shanti’s father passed away early & mother—got away. once one of shanti’s friend showed him a bollywood song of emraan hashmi. that day he discovered a pungent way to escape—kiss! to where he was escaping—did not want to know; oneday while sucking the life out of his high school sweetheart, she took a 10 seconds pause and whispered, ‘I’m running away



slippers at it and shouting: ‘free saddam Hussein!’ shanti asked his friend: who’s saddam hussein? ‘a muslim’ then who’s that burning man? ‘bush’ who’s bush? ‘the enemy of muslims’ shanti’s friend replied with such anger in his eyes

iv. song of early youth

ate loved, made love (or screwed, whatever) slept and if he wrote a doggerel by chance he felt immortal & alive—when his lovers used to say: ‘your words make my lips dry, make them wet!’ but between weed & woman he should have chosen wisely

v. prison dairy of shanti

in the streets of satkhira you may hack your lover’s husband to death, if you wish you may tease, even can you piss but you can never kiss

with bhutto bhai; but whenever I’ll hear sweet satkhira accent, I’ll remember you, shanti’ at first he wanted to report child marriage but it was easier to find a girlfriend than facing the police

iii. saddam and bush in satkhira

in an early winter morning Of 2006 on his way to school, shanti saw an effigy burning. people were throwing their

Md Mehedi Hasan’s writings have been published in *The Daily Star*, *The Daily Observer*, *The Independent*, *The Wagon Magazine* (Chennai, India), and *Arts & Letters- Dhaka Tribune*.

Love, Love Again...

MITALI CHAKRAVARTY

Perhaps, the time has come to Love, Love again

the Earth, the water, the sand, the little creatures beyond the land.

Love the trees Amaltaz heavy with bloom, Gulmohar brightening the noon, Angsanas spreading out to the skies.

The parakeets that noisily fly in broods; the golden orioles, the butterflies that flit, the honeybirds that sing

The river that quietly flows

The sun will rise again untainted and glow. The Death core will dwindling go...

Mitali Chakravarty’s poetry has been published online and as part of anthologies. Some of her poetry has recently been translated into German and read in a PEN International symposium.

