



rejoice all ye!  
see the banner of  
the new flutter...

### Celebration of Pahela Baishakh

## Ring in the New Ring in the True

By Kabir Chowdhury

The primary concern of the peasants, the vast rural population of this agricultural land was, understandably, the prospect of the crops. So some rites which grew up at one time in connection with the observance of the Bengali New Year's Day were concerned with propitiating the deities of the clouds and the rains in order to ensure a good harvest in the ensuing year.

But with the passage of time those rites underwent considerable changes. Today the observance of the Bengali New Year has acquired a new character and a special symbolic significance.

During the latter half of the 19th century when the spirit of renaissance and the rise of Bengali nationalism were clearly perceptible, the observance of the Bengali New Year came to symbolize the rationalistic urges of the people of this region. During the earlier half of the 20th century it acquired an unmistakable anti-imperialist overtone.

After the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, during the days of the Pakistani neo-colonial rule, the observance of the Bengali New Year in the then East Pakistan was primarily an expression of the cultural independence and separate cultural identity of

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the people of this region. Now, after 1971, in today's independent and sovereign Bangladesh the Bengali New Year is observed all over the country as a national holiday in a gay, festive atmosphere, full of many kinds of merry-making, where both the young and the old joyously participate. It also provides the people with a special occasion to assert their commitment to Bengali nationalism.

The Radio and the Television broadcast special programmes and the national dailies bring out special supplements welcoming the advent of the Bengali new year. Various social and cultural organisations hold literary contests, poetry recitals, musical soirees and sports competitions.

For several decades now the musical session starting at day-break in the Ramna Garden under a banyan tree organised by Chhayanaut on

the 1st of Baishakh has become an integral part of the Bengali New Year's Day celebrations in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Thousands of men, women and children, including marry foreigners, gather there and enjoy both choral and solo songs rendered by both senior well-known and comparatively less-known young artists of the country for three to four hours at a stretch.

A special feature of the Bengali new year's day celebrations is a ceremony called the Haal-Khata, the ritualistic opening of new books of accounts by business firms and trade organisations, on this occasion guests are graciously entertained with traditional sweetmeats by the proprietors who seek the parsonage and blessings of the former for the success of their ventures during the new year.

I must also refer to the fairs that are traditionally held on this day. One finds displayed in these fairs a variety of cottage industry products, various toys and household utensils, things made of clay, cane, cot, bamboo, copper, brass, conch-shell etc. The fairs are a major source of attraction for the youngsters as well as the housewives.

In the rural areas, in addition to the fairs, games like hadu-du and football feature prominently as an important part of the New Year's Day celebrations, as do folk songs.

This year the first of Baishakh, 1393, has come into our lives with a new appeal, a new sense of urgency and a feeling of fresh dedication. We must uphold at any cost the values that inspired us during our Liberation War in 1971. We must uproot from the mind of our people and the soil of our land the virus of fundamentalism. We must not allow religion to be exploited in political matters by anybody or any group, and we must take an undaunted stand against terrorism and every fascist ideology and practice. We must honestly endeavour to banish from our thoughts and our action all that is old, outworn, useless and ineffective, all that is hypocritical and false.

So, come everybody, ring in the new ... ring in the true.

Kabir Chowdhury is a Professor at the Department of English, University of Dhaka

### Everyday Use of Bengali Calendar

## Symbolic of Identity, And Necessary Too

Dr. Anisuzzaman interviewed by Nazme Sabina

LIGHT blooms as the night fades away, the sun shines with brightness. Yes, a new Bengali year, 1399, comes to our life. But we are, yet to be confirmed when the Bengali calendar was introduced.

Two views are usually put forward on the origin of Bengali calendar", said Dr Anisuzzaman, Professor, Department of Bangla, University of Dhaka.

"It was introduced sometime during the reign of Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah in Bengal, i.e. in the 16th century A.D. There doesn't seem to be sufficient evidence in favour of this view. The facts remain, however, that there was a general awakening in Bengal which dragged people to make an attempt for introducing Bengal's own calendar during Hussain Shahi rule."

Anisuzzaman went on to say, the other and more popular view is that the Bengali calendar was introduced during the reign of Emperor Akbar, when Raja Todarmoll put forward revenue reforms in Bengal.

"It was felt that the (preface of the) new solar calendar would be helpful for revenue collection and the like. So, Hizi calendar, i.e. lunar calendar of that time was transformed for making a new Bengali calendar."

He explained that in Bengal, several calendars were simultaneously in vogue. The 'Saka' year was more generally used. But there also existed local calendars, such as the 'Mogh' year, which was exclusively used in Chittagong area, 'Tripuraabda', in the small kingdom of Tripura.

Relating to existence of different calendars, Dr Zaman said that during the early days of East India Company's rule in Bengal, for official notification, more than one calendar was used, but, sometimes, they used as many as seven dates in accordance with seven different calendars.

This implies that the people were used to follow several calendars perhaps depending



Dr. Anisuzzaman

on their locality, occupation or education, which is also going on now-a-days. As for example, during the month of Ramzan, we follow Hizi calendar.

About the Bengali months of the year, Dr Anisuzzaman informed The Daily Star, that the names have persisted from the 'Saka' calendar although the order of the months are little different from that of the present, as 'Saka' starts from 'Kartik', and, now, Bengali calendar, from Baishakh.

It appears that Bengali calendar was widely used for official purposes such as revenue, tax, court, from the beginning of 19th century. Simultaneously, the 'Saka' calendar seems to have been followed almost till the end of the 19th century. The early printed books in Bengali including those of Raja Ram Mohan Ray, Vidyasagar, and the first book of Rabindranath

Tagore had 'Saka' years as the publication dates.

"What I'm trying to point out is that people were used to having more than one calendar before them. And gradually, however, the Gregorian calendar predominated, though the Bengali calendar remained in use particularly in trade and small businesses. This is evidenced by wide use of Halkhata, even now in different sectors of our daily life," Anisuzzaman said.

With the rising time of Bengali culture and tradition, English educated Bengalees turned to Bengali calendar not so much for everyday use but more as a symbol of identity.

Raj Narayan Bose, a famous Brahmin social leader known as Anglo fop in young days, claimed to have introduced observance of Bengali New Year as a counterpart of that of English New Year by educated Bengalees from the essence of Bengalee nationalism, said Dr Zaman.

About the emphasis of Bengali New Year during pre-Liberation period, he added, "This is also true of our days in East Bengal. Bengali New Year came to be celebrated with a greater fan fair after the Language Movement of 1952 and we were more determined to hold it with greater enthusiasm. We might not use Bengali calendar everyday, but it was something then, that we held with our heart and relate to it as our national identity."

We find several differences between the traditional almanac (Panjika) and Bangla

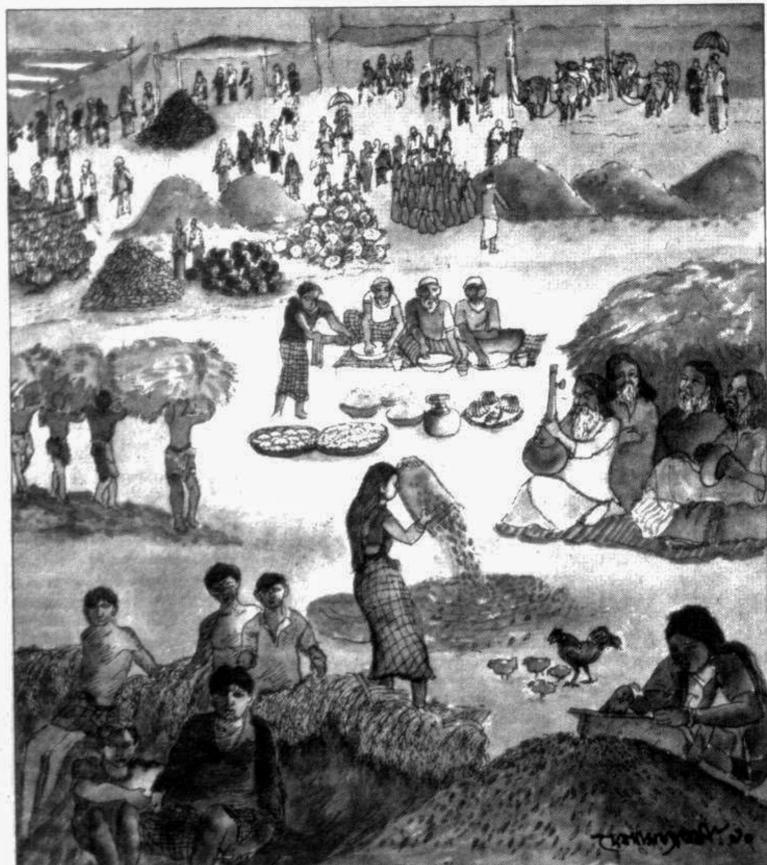
Academy almanac. Relating to this issue, Dr Zaman said, that the Bengali calendar has been reformed in Bangladesh recently, the aim of which was to simplify and make its use easier.

This has, however, made a difference in dates in the Bengali calendar as used in Bangladesh from that of traditional Bengali calendar. So, dates vary between the two leading to some confusion. But one hopes that with the more frequent use of the reformed calendar, the confusion will be removed.

Bangladesh is an agro-based country and peasants used to follow the Bengali calendar for their cultivation, harvesting, marketing etc. So, in this context, should we emphasize on Bengali calendar for planning?

"Though the planners hypothetically interact English calendar with Bengali for different steps such as fertilizer use, market pricing, but for proper interaction with peasants and others, they should have a clear conception of Bengali calendar. And also, this should go for planners of other sectors."

Dr Anisuzzaman concluded, "I'm in favour of introducing the Bengali calendar in everyday life. And, we cannot give up the Gregorian calendar in the world we live in today. So, like a bilingual person we may be using both the calendars at the same time, not neglecting Bengali calendar which has a vast implication in our socio-economic context."



POUSH MELA (left) is the fair of winter season which marks the festive mood of the rural people at the completion of a plentiful winter harvest. The festival of new rice or Nabanna is celebrated with great fervour. The harvest and the abundance of various agricultural products give a new lease of life to the average farmer of our country.

CHAITRA-SHANKRANTIR MELA (right) Chaitra-Shankranti is the last day of the month of Chaitra, marking the end of the Bengali year. Fairs and festivities used to fill up the environs of rural Bengal in celebration of this day - a significant day in the life of Bengali businessmen for they consider it an auspicious day for closing the books of accounts and for paying off old debts. (Taken from the 1991 calendar of Bangladesh Tobacco Corporation))

