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## Celebrating Life

# Where Our People are the Real Heroes

While zeroing in on the need for writing down the cultural history of the subaltern classes — a history which remains largely unwritten, the author here maintains that one of the aptest ways of celebrating the *Pahela Baishakh* would be to rediscover the creative, heroic and revolutionary potentials of our common, ordinary people. The author argues that even when savaged by the scourge of disease, death and disaster, our people do not fail to exhibit strength and stamina, will and wisdom, verve and vigour, energy and *elan*, which, however, have not yet been fully galvanized into launching a large-scale cultural revolution....



**I**t is in the face of damage and destruction and death that one rises to human authenticity. This is not a mere philosophy that a humanist or an existentialist would somewhat characteristically try to espouse and establish; this is real. And particularly real it appears, when one looks at Bangladesh, a land which is now variously imaged and evoked, described and dubbed in development and cultural discourses ceaselessly spun and woven not only by our middle-class intellectuals, but also by outsiders interested in the country.

community, have long made a fetish of poverty. True poverty is one of the most pervasive realities our people are now condemned to live. Poverty is thus real. Given its intensity and overwhelming magnitude, it may also appear surreal. Yes, one cannot suppress or bypass this phenomenon, and one should not. But, then, poverty at the same time may appear rhetorical, particularly when it is pushed to the extent that everything in our life, or every aspect of our common people's living, turns out to be an object of pity. "Oh, Bangladesh?", exclaimed a foreigner the other day, showing a few curves of frowns on his forehead, and alternately inching his eyebrow heavenward: "Oh, Bangladesh? That poor old thing!" Notice the style of his sharp reference to Bangladesh in terms of that definitive, monosyllabic word — *that*. Epithets internationally sanctioned to Bangladesh are also reflexively appropriated here in words like *poor* and *old*. And, last of all, Bangladesh is no more than a thing! Yes, poverty variously imaged and focused, particularly in the

middle-class discourses, has led to such a reflexive, typical characterization of Bangladesh at the international level. Poverty — while it is real as indicated — not only appears rhetorical, but it is also used as capital appropriate for investment. Over the last twenty-five years, if anything that has tellingly scaled up, it is what may be called *poverty-business* which one can see in areas ranging from politics through foreign policy down to development. In the name of poverty, almost everything is done: programmes are launched, models are evolved, consultants are brought in, funds are sought, strategies are revamped, seminars and symposia are held, researches undertaken, and in most cases, what happens is that the middle-class dealing in poverty certainly gains and also benefits their outside partners, while the poor, tragically enough, remain poor as usual. It would be no exaggeration to maintain that over the last

twenty-five years, most of our political, social and developmental efforts have increasingly made use of poverty and the poor in a way that Bangladesh has perpetuated its image as a land of poverty — or even as a thing that seems to lack its tradition and history, its spiritual *elan* and its linguistic heritage. I should mention it clearly that I am not at all trying to undermine the is-

sue of poverty, nor am I trying to romanticise or glorify tradition and history so as to diminish the intensity and importance of this issue of poverty. But, I am interested in looking at those strengths and possibilities our common people instinctually and characteristically exhibit, while such qualities are often lost sight of, and are part of what may be called an unwritten cultural history of the Bengalees. Before I move onto that unfocused, neglected area of our cultural history largely constituted by our common people —

cultural inferiority complex, while the second position is somewhat redolent of a kind of *hubris*, an overweening confidence potentially leading to a sort of cultural superiority complex as it were, and precludes the possibilities of further growth and development. Whatever varying consequences such positions may yield, the fact still remains that our common people in this part of the world have managed to live on their own, exhibiting their own resources and skills, strengths and stamina, insights and wisdom, courage and quality. In a land of death and damage and destruction, it is the poor who struggle most, but also celebrate life most gloriously, in the sense that they are the ones who have learnt how to live in the face of overwhelming adversities and untrammelled vicissitudes. Of course, the quality of life they lead is not to be glorified under any circumstances whatsoever; but the quality of efforts they make just to live — barely live, is something which needs to be noticed to have a feel of what massive or epic strengths they possess and exert habitually and effortlessly. What we call celebration of life is not simply a ritualistic display of one's one-off festive mood and movement, aspiration and action: celebrating life, howsoever sub-human such a life might be, means leading a life in times of extreme dangers and difficulties, and withstanding them on one's own. Our people, poor and exploited as they are, still manage to live.

### A New Year Wish

by Razia Khan

The burning delta pants  
Like some primeval beast;  
Its history lost in lies  
Memory usurped by confusion.  
To its dimmed vision  
A joyless new year brings  
Shadows of shattered dreams.  
Spring has also been elusive;  
Its cuckoos did not sing;  
Blossoms were scarce; here the spirit  
Of festival makes itself felt  
Only in brittle festoons and feasts  
Where the hungry are never seen.  
The much-awaited spring moon  
Descends on tiptoes like an exotic elfin,  
With the infant year hidden  
Under its gossamer wings; measuring delicate  
Footsteps used to dew-drops, rain-wet  
Daffodils; among vulgar weeds.  
New year fun seems  
Ironical in a parched  
And starving land.  
If each redundant morsel, instead  
Could be saved, each extra expense  
Spared to feed famished  
Infants; if the peasant was returned  
His broken dream; then all these  
Songs and dances, impassioned  
Renditions of seasonal poems,  
Saffron apparel, marigold garlands  
Would find justification  
And new meaning, the sweet intoxication  
Of spring and the oleander red  
New season, would to us, soon return.

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