For Cultural Rejuvenation



HE sun will enter the Bishakha constellation on April 14: and only in one of the 160-odd nations of the world, a public holiday will begin with that nation's best of songs, offered before tens of thousands. Pahela Baishakh, the centuries-old new year's day on the many subcontinental calendars, has become a national festival from merely a shopkeeper's occasion to open a new ledger. And a hundred thousand men and women will throng the bautomool in the Ramna Greens and another hundred thousand mill around the area from very early on the day. This festival was introduced in its present format and on the national plane by Chhauanaut less than three decades back in possibly 1966. The premier cultural organisation formed to fight Pakistani inroads into Bengali culture in the wake of the electrifying cultural event of the Tagore Centenary shaped the festival from individual and isolated celebrations in Bengali homes. These celebrations were indeed some act of defiance and denunciation against Pakistan's suppression of the Bengali people's rich cultural heritage. Attempts were sporadically made to join these celebrations into some kind of collective cultural resistance. Zohur Hossain Choudhury and his friends met to greet the Bengali new year at the Mahbub Ali Railway Institute in the early fifties. Perhaps there were one or two celebrations when friends and admirers of Beguin Sufia Kamal joined at her Tara Bagh house in Tikatully. For years together, Hosne Ara Makki organised a get-together of cultural activity on the day in the government quarters of her engineer husband. The sessions used to take on the air of some secret society's proceedings and older and wizened people like the illustrious Zahur Hossain Choudhury came out of his perennial jocular self, blabbering away in the most spectacular obscenities of civilisation -

joining together at Makki's Caution yes, but compromise no — that was the policy of the Bengali cultural activists specially at the advent of the Ayubi military dictatorship. With the brilliant success of the Tagore Centenary in the teeth of tough military regime opposition, both political and cultural resistance gained ground. While in 1962, an open anti-Ayub agitation broke out in Dhaka. Chhayanaut was consolidating its hold on society by gigantic relief work in the southern districts devastated by cyclones as well as by the introduction of festivals celebrating the seasons, mainly autumn and spring. Although Ayub swept the BD elections of '64 against Fatima Jinnah, setting a model modus operandi

to pray for the souls of those

Pahela Baishakh, as a kind of movement, never even as an attempt on the sideline, tried to revive or propagate the Bengali calendar. Patently because it was national rejuvenation rather than going back to a particular calendar that had been set as the aim.

for subsequent coup leaders turned champions of democracy to adopt in their own good time - the campaign threw into the open all sacred bulls of Pakistan. The situation further made tenuous by Khwaja Shahabuddin, Ayub's information minister, banning Rabindra Sangeet on radio and TV. Tagore's melodies of immaculate beauty became a national cause. Cultural resistance, built up over the years with grit and rare steadfastness, found a focal point in the promotion and propagation of Tagore Song. Shahabuddin's foolishness landed East Pakistan on the lap of Chhayanaut which had been championing Tagore songs from day one of its existence.

Pakistan's miserable failure to involve the eastern wing in its unfortunate war with India,

opened newer wounds on that

miserable state's body politic.

Sheikh Mujib's Six Points

found a fertile and ready

strike the nail on its head, and

Chhayanaut didn't miss to

make the most of it. It

launched the Pahela Baishakh

festival which caught on the

nationalistic fervour of the

people and became a darling of

the middle class in no time.

What did the Chhayanaut na-

tionalisation of the Pahela.

Baishakhi have in it to make

people accept it so quickly and

with so much enthusiasm? The

situation then was rife with re-

jection of Pakistan for all the

reasons under the sun. But all

of these were negative. If the

Bengalees were becoming anti-

Pakistan at a very fast pace,

what were they growing pro

to? So far nothing tangible

could be produced for an an-

swer. Now here was something

for a very good answer. And

the source of that answer

could easily be tracked to

Ekushey, the start of the Great

Language Movement. It was in

1952 that the Bengalees

asserted in a big way that they had a language for whose

honour and rightful place in

the scheme of things specially

of the Pakistani state they

were prepared to die. The exi-

gencies of the movement to

succeed politically had blurred

certain important and basic

question that the Ekushey had

raised. A language was not re-

vealed one good day. It evolved

in culture over a long time,

historical and even prehistoric.

Bengalees had an ancient cul-

ture - and it was neither born

nor imported from abroad one

day in the twelfth century

when Ikhtiruddin bin-Bakhtiar

Khilji took Lakhnauti - the

capital of Lakshman Sen.

These questions largely about

the identity of the Bengalees

were raised but not pursued

with any seriousness - politi-

cal action wholly took over the

attention of the people. With

the successful rehabilitation of

Rabindranath in the mind of

the people and also the suc-

cess of the festivals celebrating

the seasons — Bengalees, spe-

cially Muslims whose it was

the portion to roam about the

That was the moment to

ground.

wilderness of / an identity quandary, started on the way called so aptly by Badruddin Umar as the homecoming of the Bengalee Muslim.

In answering positively and convincingly to the questions first raised by Ekushey, Pahela Baishakh also answered as to what our people were turning pro to. People were very positively turning to their own history and culture and identity all of which lay under a miledeep debris of communal disinformation campaign mounted by the Pakistan movement. Looked at this way. Pahela was but the cultural extension of the Ekushey and it clicked pat with the mainstream of the overall nationalistic resurgence in the Bengalee people.

There were a number of other significant aspects to the

by Waheedul Haque

why of Pahela Baishakh's suc-

cess. One, it called out people

to nature, something 'Ra-

bindranath did throughout the

whole of his life, but would not

get a meaningful social re-

sponse. Two, Pahela Baishakh

called out people to music -

the best in the Bengal tradition

and far from being merely en-

tertaining. Most of the vast

crowds of audience had hardly

had any experience of live

music. Now, on this Pahela

Baishakh dawn, music was re-

verberating among the ele-

ments - coming to the indi-

vidual from all directions and

literally drowning him. This

was music ordinarily not

heard, music that was very ev-

idently humanizing nature -

saturating the light and the sky

and the water and greens

around with human sentiments

and beautifying all of them

with man-made forms. Music.

architectonically excellent and

presented so in the wide open.

takes over the power of the

elements and surpasses them

in their hold on the human

mind. Three, Pahela Baishakh

calls out people to an almost

Eid-like vast congregation but

of peace and beauty, bon homie

transcending communal and

other barriers. A warmth is generated among a multitude of people, something quite unknown so far. These were the factors of

the success of the Pahela Baishakh before the break-up of Pakistan. The musical function at the bautomool, success in contributing to the disenchantment, with that monstresity of a state through putting forth very positive values of one's culture and amusic and history and calendar. It-must have taken on newer relevances in the post-liberation independent Bangladesh, for now there was nothing to pull away people from. While the first achievement continued to vield good fresh results compare the state of Ekushev observance to the Pahela Baishakh celebration - Pahela

Baishakh's paramount potential

in contributing to the national

integration of the people came

into play only after the War of

continues to rule society and

politics with an ever increas-

ing grip is thoroughly incapaci-

tating the nation to come into

its own and build a national

will and an appreciation of the

true national interest. Ekushev

that first transcended the

Pakistan-promoted social

chasm is now a spent force

specially after being eaten up

in big portions by that pseudo-

cultural event, the boi-mela.

The truly nationalistic politics

of Awami League, the architect

of independence, has been

dangerously dissipated by its

avowed antithesis mainly

through the latter's taking up

the same name of nationalism.

albeit of the Bangladeshi vari-

ety. Unless AL is able to re-

assert its ideas on the essence

of our nationhood -- something

embracing all in the land and

not a mindless exercise in ex-

clusion - the integration that'

we need as the first factor for

our survival will not be there.

In education too, the divisive

attitudes of communal superi-

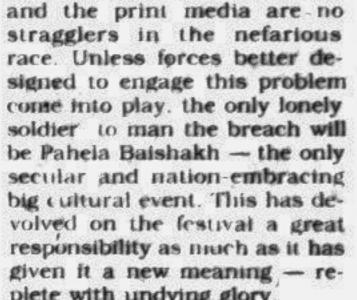
The communal divide that

Liberation.

signed to engage this problem come into play, the only lonely soldier to man the breach will be Paheia Baishakh - the only secular and nation-embracing big cultural event. This has devolved on the festival a great responsibility as much as it has given it a new meaning - replete with undying glory. Pahela Baishakh, as a kind

attempt on the sideline, tried to revive or propagate the Bengali calendar. Patently because it was national rejuvenation rather than going back to a particular calendar that had en set as the aim. The Western Gregorian calendar and Christian era are by now universal devices used by all nations of the world alike - as practical, technical and scientific tools to handle time, the fourth dimension of matter. But for cultural purposes, the local and national calendars are being retained perhaps to good effect. Even a hopelessly erratic lunar calendar is being retained by the world religious of Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. Indo-Chinese and Chinese cultural events also abide by the lunar dates. We in Bengal are one step ahead of that situation in that we have a very dependable traditional calendar too, with which our agricultural practices and cycles of day-to-day activity are tied. While the Bengali calendar should continue to serve the cultural as well as agriculturerelated life, a Bengali new year's day is not just designed to replace the Gregorian one. It is not just to wish a shubho nabobarsho on April 14 that the festival has been launched.

The idea is cultural rejuvenation, to bring man closer to culture and culture closer to man at a time when a bankrupt Pakistan had left us with a wedge driven between the two entities that have been but one indivisible whole since man walked on two feet and used a stick to get things done. What Pakistan did to us, the industrialised civilisation of the capitalist West, flying on the wings of consumerism, is doing to the entire global family. Divorcing man of culture. Pahela Baishakh is a mighty stand to fight both back.



ority, etc. are being dissemi-

nated without as much as a

mild protest. The electronic

of movement, never even as an HE land of thirteen par has gradually receded in the lores. Parban, as understood by people in large swathes of the Indian subcontinent, is a ritualistic celebration with both traditional and religious overtones. Festivals. on the other hand, can either be totally religious or secular. Parhans are mostly low-keyed localised celebrations of events, but festivals spread beyond such boundaries and grow in range and scope Parban, if extended, can assume the stature of a festival but festival embraces its premature death the moment it is reduced to the shape of a parban. Despite this clear distinc tion between the two types of social events that lent the Bangalees their special way of celebrating life, one is sure to miss quite a lot with either of the type's disappearance from

> society. Because with their loss, the cultural richness and the colours that help unfold life in its mellifluous vibrancy also have all gone for ever. It takes a long time — sometimes centuries and even millennia to shape social events for collective celebration. The pre-Vedic Indian society invented such social events in that men and women danced together throughout the night, while slaughtered animals (mostly oxen) were being roasted for their least. The Greeks assentbled with food and drink to enjoy the all-night drama festival at the amphitheatre where plays by Aeschylus. Sophocles and Euripedes used to be staged

Both India and Greece have over the past 5,000 years given up those ancient festivals. New

bans in twelve months

We Need to Have by Nilratan Halder

Festivals We Had and

ones have evolved and remind. One surely needs leisure and recreation. But then it is no guarantee that the more leisure you have, the more creative you become. It depends on the depth of mind and its interaction with nature. The climate and the surrounding nature of a particular place or land decide to a certain extent the shape of festivals.

Let us frankly admit that most of our parbans and festi-

village women had to spend a busy time for a month of so before the Chaitra Sankrantir mela (fair). The occasion was specially joyous for households that had their daughter married only recently, because the daughter and son-in-law were treated as the guests of honour there. The neighbours too joined in the fete, New clothes were a must and people were. generous to spend on sweetmeat that had a big share in the fair's sale. Specially the son-in-laws entered into a competition for sweetening

Let us frankly admit that most of our parbans and festivals have failed to embrace people across the religious divides with the same amount of warmth and enthusiasm that went into the making of the spring drama festival in Greece or the uninhibited dance festival in ancient India. Yet we are lucky to retain a few from the past with almost a secular nature and even are inventing one or two having nothing to do with any religious or ritualistic performance.

vals have failed to embrace people across the religious divides with the same amount of warmth and enthusiasm that went into the making of the spring drama festival in Greece or the uninhibited dance festival in ancient India. Yet we are lucky to retain a few from the past with almost a secular nature and even are inventing one or two having nothing to do with any religious or ritualistic performance. The fact that sophisticated wonder machines have thrown information and entertainment of all types at an awesome speed into our drawing rooms goes to account for the diminishing importance of our traditional festivals. But those of congregatory nature have their special appeal and that is the reason why some of them survive the onslaught of electronic media.

Of the traditional festivals, Chaitra-Sankranti (the last day of the Bengali month of Chaitra), was marked by a festive observance that used to rouse people into a reinvigorating elixir of life. A fair held on the occasion at a suitable place, where people from a number of villages used to visit, made the high point but society prepared for this gala event well in advance. Beaten, rice, fried rice, puffed rice must be in store and the

their ties with the father-inlaws' homes with as much sweetmeat as they could possibly manage to buy at the fair. Their father-in-laws too threw a challenge by giving them a big note to spend before they started for the fair with a large retinue of in-laws.

Those customs are dying and even if fairs are held in villages, they no longer pull as many crowds as they used to do earlier. The social fervour and easy-flowing quiet beauty of simple life have been replaced by a perverse intrusion of alien songs and a medley of cacophonous sounds, thanks to electronic gadgets. Where that intrusion has found little relevance is the traditional Hal Khata, the year-end closing ceremony of ledger by the business community. Traders host a sumptuous feast for their clients who square up their credits on the day. This event, once so widespread, also does not find favour with many traders now. Yet it is the only unalloyed type that is yet to be replaced by anything of

foreign import. Another most important festival was Dolotsab (the festival of colour). It was such a joyous and beautiful occasion that for a day the whole village transformed into the woodland colourful celebration of mythi-

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The Real Heroes

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'Bengali Renaissance' the beginning of which is conventionally traced back to the and keep living, exhibiting unusual tour de force which can further be explored and promoted to break the century-old traps of poverty and exploitation.

The Pahela Baishakh festival. as it has arrived today marking the beginning of a new Bengali year, is not just a routine ritual invested with songs and dances, it is also an occasion which can take us to that unheeded area of our political and cultural history where our people are the real heroes. The fact that our common, ordinary people are the real heroes is well borne out by the history of our

pundits, consultants, developdesigning a survival strategy

It is in this context that we tant. These are, of course,

protests and struggles against exploitation, foreign domination and injustice. All positive political movements that took place in this part of the world were animated by the spontaneous, large-scale participation of the subaltern classes exemplified in numerous upsurges ranging from the Fagir movement, the peasant revolts such as the Neel movement and the famous Pabna uprising of farmers, the movement of tantis and malangees, the protest against Debi Sinha, the Bangura movement, the Choar movement, the Saontal movement down to the Liberation Movement for Bangladesh. All these movements indeed clearly attest to the scale and quality of sacrifices and the means and measures of strengths that none but our peasants and workers can bring out. In fact, whatever positive things we have achieved so far, politically and socio-economically, have, been possible only through the strength, sacrifice and courage of our common people whose intense commitment to a new life, a new society, a new season always serves as a guiding principle and shaping force in our life. The role of the middle-class at times looks effectively catalytic, but mostly it tends to gravitate towards

of artificial cultural constructs invoked and imposed by the middle-class, we often tend to forget that the most significant areas of our cultural history are inhabited by none but our common people, whose tales. fiction, myths, magic, music, songs, dances, rituals, festivals not only present an astonishingly rich panorama of diversity, but also span a long stretch of time exceeding a thousand years. The rich store of folk-texts whose signs and icons are still alive in the rural areas - which, however, remain relegated to the background primarily owing to the hegemony of the artificial middle-class culture largely constituted by written words at the expense of people's oral elan — and the tradition of jatra, punthi, pala, etc, still constitute a rich cultural history of the subaltern classes whose natural and spontaneous but amazing creative zest and eclat speak of the continuing celebration of life even in the face of all-devouring disasters and dangers.

reaping benefits out of people's

Under the spell and stress

movements.

What is known as the Bengali Enlightenment sometimes overstated as the

nineteenth century - was not only a middle-class phenomenon, but it was largely shaped and animated by the creative possibilities and participation of the subaltern classes, whose protests and movements, from time to time, yielded a progressive social dialectic in favour of freedom, free thinking, secularism, democracy, and above all, in favour of a life that celebrates itself even in the face of death. Through various trials and triumphs, it is our people who still remain progressive. creative, tolerant, responsible, democratic, non-communal; secular, and even revolutionary, and what is usually termed poverty so glibly attributed to our common people is only an economic phenomenon perpetuated not by the people themselves, but by the bankruptcy and poverty of the ruling elite. While our people always try to move forward, most of our middle-class political leaders and cultural gurus tend to move backward or wallow in the slough of crises!

The celebration of the Pa-

hela Baishakh is actually a cel-

ebration of life, and to cele-

brate life is to celebrate its un-

derlying strength and possibil-

ities which our people can only claim to have. Middle-class festivities with reiterated patterns and postures today look like routine responses, but the fact that the people "not only survive but prevail", to use Faulkner's words, points to an ardent celebration of life in this part of the world, which perhaps cannot be found elsewhere. In a country where spectacles of death and dying, damage and destruction may fairly be scheduled into its annual routine, where the patterned succession of floodsdrought-tornado-earthquake keeps the Faulknerian question in view: "when will I be blown up?" and where hunger, poverty, malnutrition, disease, illiteracy including political deceits and crises lead most of our people to the pronouncement of "I am no more than an animal that someone has stabbed in the stomach", our people still fare forward, and give us (the middle-class) what we eat, utilize, exploit, and finally spoil. What is really unfortunate is

that despite such enormous possibilities and strengths of our people, they have not yet been adequately galvanized into a continuous and integrated cultural revolution that can ensure none's but people's power in all spheres. On this day of Pahela Baishakh, let us all look forward to such a moment and a movement, and sing — esho he Baishakh, esho,



ANGLADESH like many other so-called developing countries is caught in a deep dilemma how to reconcile its cultural sovereignty with a strong tide of homogenisation fueled by the urge for rapid economic growth? Apparently there should not have been a problem as such, if the totality of the economic process had paid heed to people's basic urge for survival without sacrificing pleasure. But, this did not happen, as the development model based on the imported technology (of both ideas and machines) has been suddenly superimposed on a cultural plane which has its own internal logic and underlying strength. The western impersonal knowledge system generated through a slow, endogeneous European process for centuries was suddenly transplanted in the Third World societies after the Second World War for replicating a development model which was unknown to the ordinary people. The elite of the Third

Towards Culture-friendly Development

Development models and paradigms which do not have the cultural content and form rooted in, and imbued with, the aspirations and actions of the common, ordinary people can only lead to the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, destruction of local production machines, and unremittingly hopeless dependence on foreign aid for even day-to-day survival, argues here one of the leading development economists of the country who, also, stresses the need for pursuing a sovereign approach to development through accommodating space for people's culture:

World who had access to the Western knowledge system and also the privilege of being close to the power-network were quickly coopted for propagating a development paradigm which also suited

The timing was also very carefully calculated. The Second World War left the people of the Third World with an unprecedented dream for freedom. The elite were surely efticient enough to convince the masses that economic growth based on Western technology and wisdom was the only answer to their problem of underdevelopment. Easily, the elite were able to win over the collective consciousness of these countries and instilled in the mind of the masses a dream for development at any cost. if necessary by even destroying their stock of resources, natural and others. Hence, by the end of the 1950s, a generalised developmentalist conscience had already taken a deep root in the mind of the people, and even the ordinary people who sur-

vived for centuries on their

own creativity and cultural an to surrender their 'sovereignty of approach to sure al' to the imposed readymane Western recipe. As a result, a confusing 'mixture of cultures' pervaded our educational system, media and finally the public mind. People

The other part has the craving for a similar consumption-pattern without the supporting purchasing power. In a sense. both parts of society have become suspended in the process. All this has happened in a period fraught with profound social discord. The recent fall

Chhayanaut Celebration: Music and Mirth

by Atiur Rahman

began to question their own strengths, and felt ashamed of projecting the indigenous ethos of survival. The elite were smart enough to end what was 'rural' without creating adequate 'urban space'. They were able to introduce attractive, new, modern products without ensuring adequate purchasing power of the masses. Ultramodern technologies were introduced without creating a dynamic market for their operationalisation. And the end-result has been tensions in all fronts. Both the economy and society have become divided. A part of society is now highly Westernised in its consumption-pattern and wastage of resources.

of bi-polarism and the aggressive onslaught of the unipolar cultural crusade through the globalisation processes of all kinds, especially the media, have introduced further tensions into the already fragile social harmony prevailing in the 'developing' world.

The latest attempt at the structural adjustment of the economy without being sensitive to the environmental and cultural needs of the ordinary people has further destabilised the balance which has been so far somehow upholding the 'social harmony'. The drive for modernisation mainly led by the elite originating from the global middle class has helped create a local condition where people have no access to the modern means and at the same time, have abandoned the age-old solutions to the problems which their forefathers had been so zealously preserving. Instead, the local resources, both physical and social, have been channelled into implementing unfamiliar development projects mostly designed by foreign consultants and aided by the local elite. The end-result has been development disasters like 'Beel Dakatia', the fallout of a mega embankment project.

In the process, even though people physically live in Bangladesh, they have indeed become 'cultural immigrants'. They have been forced to forget their own ways of living and dreaming, but have not been provided with alternative means and dreams. The majority of our people have been thus made 'immigrants' without ever setting foot on foreign soil. The lavish consumptionpattern and acute social segregation or individualism which are the basic characteristics of that brand of developmentalism propagated by the modern

opment and also an end to be

with whatever we have.

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ment partners and, of course, our 'financial wizards' have only led to the concentration of wealth, destruction of local production machines, and hopeless dependence on foreign assistance for even day-today survival. Society as a whole has acquired a predatory mode of behaviour without attaining sufficient output to meet its basic needs. Such a behaviour always leads to a state of perpetual scarcity for many and affluence for a few. The majority; therefore, have started feeling ashamed of their own values, which they themselves now deem 'primitive' and 'underdeveloped'. As a result, poverty has become the dominant buzzword and the whole nation has been submerged in the defeating strategy of 'poverty alleviation' rather than

feel the urgency of building a more positive outlook about a humanist economy where people's own wisdom, creativity, pride, self-respect and priorities can become more imporessential ingredients of a people's culture. Culture should not be seen merely in terms of language, religion, nationality or in any art-form. People's culture indeed constitutes the whole gamut of coming together' in times of crises and their struggles for a respectful living. If defined so broadly. culture can then easily become an essential input for devel