

Tomari Modhuro Rupe — Homage to Debobroto Biswas

Even after all these years, I can still remember vividly the concerts Debobroto gave at the TSC, or at Ramna Park, or on Bangladesh Television. He was not a good-looking man, nor was he the type of singer who dressed up for public performances. Indeed, he seemed almost oblivious of the numerous eyes focused on him and was apparently wrapped up in a world where he could only be attuned to the spirit of Tagore's music.

by Fakrul Alam

I must have been towards the end of 1972, or perhaps it was early in 1973, that Debobroto Biswas first came to Bangladesh. But while I am no longer sure about the dates or the number of his public performances, I still remember how thrilled I was to be present as he sang to a packed auditorium at the Teacher's Student's Centre of the University of Dhaka or to an even larger audience which had thronged to hear him in Ramna Park. I had "discovered" Debobroto in 1971 when he performed all of us who were in Dhaka had to spend hours at home listening to the Radio or playing music on tape recorders. What I had liked about him then was not only his resonant voice, so deep, clear, and sonorous, but his singing style: here, at last, there was a male interpreter of Rabindro Sangeet who did not sound effeminate or maudlin or mushy! Moreover, he was so dramatic and so capable of drawing out the mood of each song that they all seemed to be unique and yet unmistakably part of Tagore's oeuvre.

Even after all these years, I can still remember vividly the concerts Debobroto gave at the TSC, or at Ramna Park, or on Bangladesh Television. He was not a good-looking man, nor was he the type of singer who dressed up for public performances. Indeed, he seemed almost oblivious of the numerous eyes focused on him and was apparently wrapped up in a world where he could only be attuned to the spirit of Tagore's music. True, occasionally his concentration wavered as on Bangladesh Television when he pleaded to Mr. Jamil Chowdhury, then possibly the Director General of the institution, so that the television cameras did not gaze into his consciousness. But indifferently dressed and unimpressively looking though he was and dismissed though he appeared to be in a world where he could grasp nothing else except the spirit of Rabindro Sangeet, the moment he

started to sing he cast a spell on everyone present or watching. It did not seem to matter whether you were part of a live audience or at home in front of your black and white television set; he seized your imagination with that vibrant bass voice and the force of his interpretation of each song, so that what had begun to sound jaded and undistinguished because singer after singer had flattened it out, suddenly appeared packed with emotion and thought.

And yet, Viswa Bharati Sangeet Samiti, custodians of Tagore's music, did its best to keep Debobroto Biswas away from his audience for a long while. To them, he was a pariah, someone to be shunned because he had sullied the purity of Rabindra Sangeet. Zealous overlords of the music, they attempted to keep the singer away from his audience because Debobroto had dared to be different and because he had supposedly deviated from the path laid out by Tagore. Hadn't he used instruments forbidden by the poet himself in his renderings of Rabindra Sangeet? And why did he take liberties with the *swaritipi*? After all, hadn't Tagore himself clearly frowned on anyone who chose to interpret his music in a manner not sanctioned by him?

What the earnest enforcers of Tagore's dicta about his music could not comprehend, however, was that the moment the songs entered the public domain they were fair game for an original artist who wanted to interpret them in her or his own way. Such an artist knows that you can never reproduce the original by slavishly following the *swaritipi* and that the most important thing to do was to try to capture the spirit of the original imaginatively. In fact, there can be no going back to the origins for even the most faithful; every rendering is necessarily an interpretation. From this point of view, there seems to be no point in having singers who are content to be merely clones. In other words, there can either be weak interpreters who, so to speak,

stick to the letter of the law only to kill its spirit, or strong ones who stamp on their own personality onto songs, thereby revivifying them for their times. Unfortunately, Debobroto Biswas paid a heavy price for being a "strong" interpreter. As his popularity grew with almost every one of his discs, so did the animosity of the "weak" interpreters, and the people who controlled the Viswa Bharati Sangeet Samiti. In the end, the Samiti decided to deny him permission for any further recordings. In effect, Debobroto found out the power of fundamentalists who, no matter what their stripes, always stifle freedom of expression in the name of "truth" or "purity".

The last years of Debobroto's life were thus bitter ones as he was deprived of his right to record new songs. But since the truly great artist can never be silenced, he was able to circumvent the restrictions imposed on him in a number of ways, knowing that the copyright laws which gave the Viswa Bharati Sangeet Samiti such arbitrary and unlimited control over recordings would not last for ever. Debobroto's recording company had him record many seconds which they could publish eventually. Debobroto enthusiasts also saw to it that some of the *jalshas* and private performances that he gave were taped so that they could also be preserved for posterity. And then there were the public performances such as the one organized by the legendary Hemanto whose vision led him to arrange an event where Debobroto could perform his swan song.

I feel privileged to be among those who have heard the Indian Radio broadcast of the public concert where Hemanto talks about Debobroto and where Debobroto responds to the restrictions imposed on him by Viswa Bharati. In introducing Debobroto, Hemanto showed a kinship of spirit as well as generosity truly worthy of the greatest Bengali singer of our time. In responding to Hemanto, Debobroto too was



gracious and dignified. But when he turned to his relationship with the custodians of Tagore's heritage, Debobroto registered his pain and indignation. Debobroto's deepest response in that concert to the honour being shown him by Hemanto and others who had organized the event, however, came when he started to sing: despite his age and ill health he soared as he sang above all the pettiness that had tried to hem him in. "With full-throated ease," he poured forth his soul, displaying in the process Tagore's music in the spirit of his thought.

Debobroto Biswas died not long after the public concert as did Hemanto. We are fortunate of course, in having their recordings with us. In Debobroto's case, we are also fortunate that every once in a while new recordings are coming out of *jalsha* or of songs his recording company had made in anticipation of the expiry of the copyright on Tagore's music. *Tomari Modhuro Rupe* — In Your Pleasing Shape — is one such collection based on a *jalsha* Debobroto must have given very late in his life. His voice on the tape is thinner than it has ever been; the recording quality is poor; the musical accompaniments are of the most elementary kind; and yet, the music that is preserved in these interpretations of Tagore's songs' Such divine harmonies! They are what inspired me to write this homage to Debobroto Biswas.

My Favourite Pahela Baishakh

Our Drama Artistes Look Back and Speak

"I will take you to the fair, o my dear, where life meets life, where love and light and hope are one in the river flowing" — so sings a poet in *Joie de vivre*, in his spirit of celebration of the Pahela Baishakh which returns and returns, with time rolling on. Since the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state, we had so far celebrated twenty-two Pahela Baishakh festivals, and today we reach the twenty-third one. Now, looking back, what do we see? Was there any festival, particularly significant or enjoyable, that we can look back to, and listen to that metaphorical-river speaking to us once again about life, love and unity? Schrezad Joya Monami Latif of The Daily Star approached some of our drama notables — mostly associated with play-acting and direction — for answers. Here, they look back and speak...

Aly Zaker



The Pahela Baishakh in 1971 was the one I remember best. Yes, there was so much euphoria then; the frustration about not getting what we fought for hadn't set in as yet, you see. Fundamentalism hadn't spread its fangs. It was a wonderful time, after liberation, every man, woman and child in all the colours, fearless. It was the euphoria of a nation just liberated. It was the most spontaneous Pahela Baishakh that I can think of.

Sara Zaker



My first Pahela Baishakh was my most enjoyable one. The first means the first one I participated in. It must've been the Baishakh of 1967 or 1968. I'm not sure, I was very young then. I went to Ramna with my parents and listened to all the people singing. Some of the people participating in the cultural events were my own parents and friends; so it was a great thrill to watch them perform. Also, the great spirit of the Pahela Baishakh was enthralling.

Suborna Mustafa



I guess the one I remember most is the one right after liberation, in 1972. Although I was only twelve then, I remember celebrating our new year in our newly freed country. I went to Ramna with *baba*

and Rokeya Hall *aidas* is really heartening. Despite being busy all the year, I make it a point to come to the procession as I get a chance to meet my old friends. I love looking at the traditional handicrafts with the age-old yellow, black and blue dhotis.

Humayun Faridi



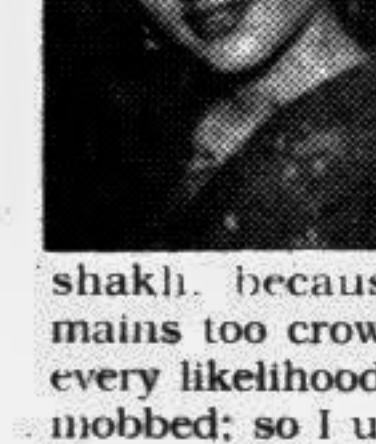
I don't recall any Pahela Baishakh being particularly enjoyable, but the Baishakhs of my childhood were the best ones! I would spend my entire time picking mangoes off the trees as well as below them.

Abul Hayat



"Pahela Baishakh's are always enjoyable, and I can't think of any, particularly special to me."

Bipasha Hayat



Last year we spent the entire Pahela Baishakh doing a stage-play (with the Bangla Theater group). Usually I don't do anything on the Pahela Baishakh, because the day remains too crowded and there's every likelihood that I shall get mobbed; so I usually can't enjoy any of it. But, last year, the year which marked the beginning of a new century, I spent

the entire day in a play (*mancha*) and that was wonderful. I loved that, and have the fondest memories of it."

Ferdousi Majumdar



All Pahela Baishakhs are wonderful, just the thought of a new year beginning gives me a wonderful feeling. I think always of the Tagore song "esho hey Baishakh..."; it signifies the beginning of a new life. Nowadays I no longer go to the functions at the Ramna or at Chhayano, because these days there are huge crowds who go there with different intentions from just enjoying the New Year. The spirit is different. The joy, the celebration have become different these days, less spontaneous. But at home we try to keep some sort of festivity in the air, celebrate the coming of a new year. All Pahela Baishakhs to me are wonderful happy days, and I remember them all well."

Tarana Halim



"I think I was in Class VII or VIII then; During those days, I remember I went to Ramna accompanied by my closest female friends and by my family members. We listened to the music and just hung around there, enjoying the day. I was much younger then, so the thought of the Pahela Baishakh got me all excited. I thought about which saree I would wear, and what matching jewellery I should have. I even bought a new saree for the occasion. I no longer go to the public places to celebrate the Pahela Baishakh, because the crowds

are huge and no one ever feels that I am a private person too, with a family, with kids and that I should be left alone to enjoy the Pahela Baishakh with them. At my mother's house, however, we still celebrate the Pahela Baishakh with every one receiving a little gift for the occasion, and sharing a meal as a family, there is that festivity in the air. But those Pahela Baishakhs when I was younger strike me as the best ones, because then I had the freedom to roam around and enjoy the day as any normal citizen."

Abdullah Al Mamun



"1972, the first Pahela Baishakh we celebrated in free and independent Bangladesh is the one that comes to mind. It was an emotional event, the first time we were celebrating ourselves in our independent country. Especially because during Pakistan times, it was unthinkable that we could ever celebrate our new year. Although I remember the first Pahela Baishakh after independence being disorganized and indiscipline it was a different kind of euphoria then, the spirit of our independence as a Bengali nation."

Ramendu Majumdar

"When I was a child, the 'Pahela Baishakhs' in my village Lokhipur were the most enjoyable ones. There was a different kind of excitement then. We would all band together and go to the *meta* which was the main attraction those days, for us."

The Pahela Baishakh Festival Thus Spake Our Artists

by Fayza Haq

If any group feels intensely about the Pahela Baishakh, it is the artists of Dhaka who just don't talk about their emotions, but do something tangible for the pleasure of thousands of onlookers on that day. Here are some candid opinions of some of these artists.



RAFIQUN NABI, the Director of the Institute of Fine Arts, speaking in his office, in his busy schedule, has this to say about the Bangla New Year: "Pahela Baishakh should be celebrated not only by the Fine Arts students, as it has been, for the past few years, but by people even in the remote areas of the country." He says, "It is only recently that we are making much of the Bangla New Year. Again, while we celebrate the Pahela Baishakh, we forget about the Bangla year the rest of the time. This should bring in festivities all over Bangladesh, not just in Dhaka, and even in private homes. As the Bangla year goes according to our six seasons, this is most suited to our culture. For me, the most memorable new year was in 1969, when the artists held an exhibition *Kalbaisakh*, which was a symbolic protest against the domination of West Pakistan."

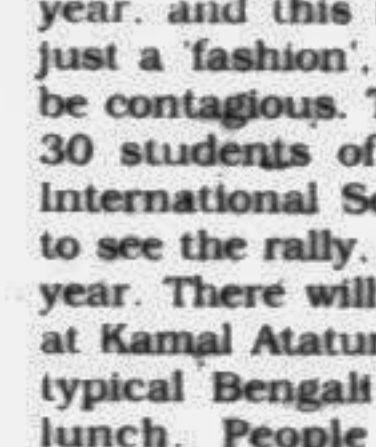


NASREEN BEGUM, another teacher noted for her oriental art pieces, says, "I believe that the feelings that arise during the Pahela Baishakh are better than the ones for the Eid. We tend to go out and enjoy ourselves much more. The dress and food do not cost very much. Both men and women dress in cotton, but the atmosphere is simply gorgeous, these are no elements of envy and rivalry as they arise during the Eid festival. Last year, we celebrated during Ramadan, and I believe the *maulvis* did not quite appreciate this. I admit there was roughness among the boys, which was shown even by BTv — but the percentage of the bad elements is a small one."

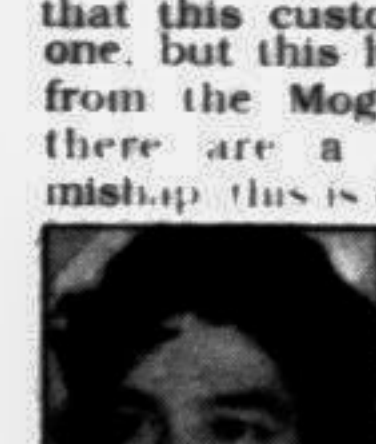
JAMAL AHMED, a teacher and artist, adds: "People now celebrate the Pahela Baishakh with food and drinks — like the western new year, and this may at first be just a fashion, but it tends to be contagious. This year about 30 students of the American International School will come to see the rally, as they did last year. There will be a food-stall at Kamal Ataturk Road, selling typical Bengali breakfast and lunch. People may criticise that this custom is a Hindu one, but this has come down from the Moghul period. If there are a few cases of mishap, this is only normal."



MAHMUDUL HAQUE, comments, in between taking his graphics classes, "It is only a few independence culture-conscious individuals who have come forward to make everyone aware of this day — and these are a handful of very artists and students. Earlier, there were celebrations only by *Chhayano* and perhaps a small function by the Shilpakala Academy. For me, the celebration of the year 1400 (two years ago) will remain an unforgettable one. Parades and festivities require financial involvements. I doubt if this year the day will be celebrated as well (due to lack of funds)."

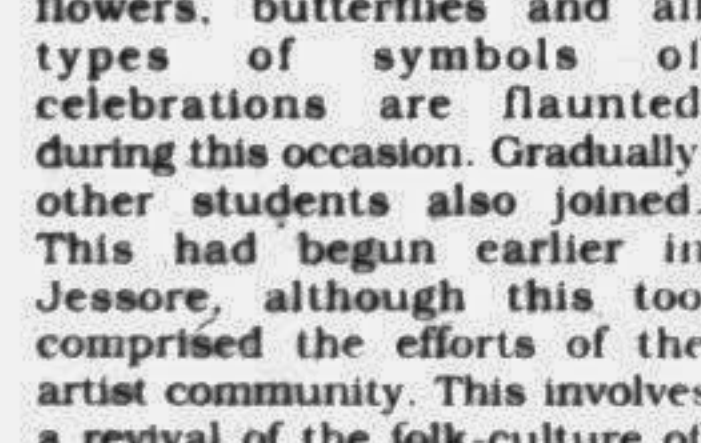


FAREH ZEB, another artist and teacher adds, "I join and guide the *Ananda Shobha Jatra*. Since it is expensive, we try to get donations. For the last five years, we have been successful, but recently the donations have petered out. We want new artists to join so that when we are not there, they can continue with the work. Some people complain that it is *Hinduani*, although the motifs are taken from 'Sonargaon', which is definitely Muslim in origin. People like Asaduzzaman Nour and Akku Chowdhury are always helpful, as regards donations. However, the rest of the people are less enthusiastic, we have an agreement with the *Chhayano* people that when their programme ends, we begin at 8 am. Normally, Bangladeshis have little scope for recreation. This is a good chance for them. We get about 6,000 people for our audience."

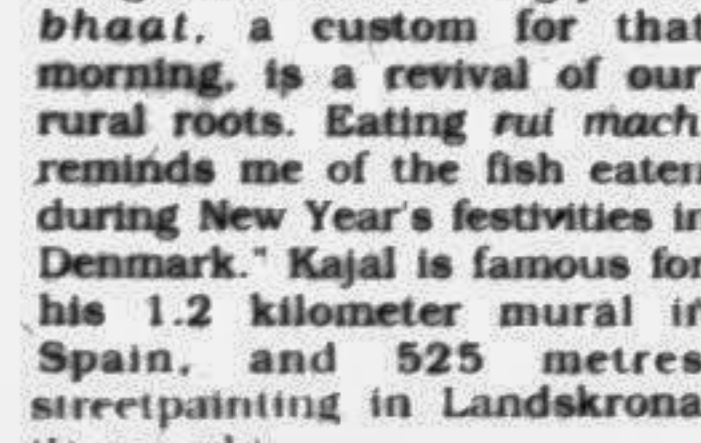


SAYED KHONDOKAR, known better in his nomadic plume "ASK", says: "The *Chhayano* celebrations have been there for 30 years. To see the young men in their *purjabis* and the young women in their white *sarees* with red borders at the TSC

small informal meal he had for his intimate friends, says, "The Bangla new year as we all know, is connected with a businessmen's book-keeping and a farmer's harvest Baishakh. The Art College began the *Ananda Shobha Jatra* in 1989 — which is different from other programmes like 'Ekushey' and 'March 26th', as the processions are pure joy. Masks, paper-clowns, horses, flowers, butterflies and all types of symbols of celebrations are flaunted during this occasion. Gradually, other students also joined. This had begun earlier in Jessore, although this too comprised the efforts of the artist community. This involves a revival of the folk-culture of Bangladesh, as folk-toys are converted into large-scale statues, made of bamboo and covered with coloured jute and paper. During 1991, we cleaned up the graffiti from the walls of the Art Institute and covered them with folk-motifs from Modhuboni and Bengali Folk Art. Eating *panta bhaat*, a custom for that morning, is a revival of our rural roots. Eating *nui mach* reminds me of the fish eaten during New Year's festivities in Denmark." Kajal is famous for his 1.2 kilometer mural in Spain, and 525 metres streetpainting in Landskrona (Sweden).



SAYED KHONDOKAR, well-known for that masks that are paraded during the Pahela Baishakh, explains how he makes his birds, butterflies, tigers, snakes, etc. "The main trick is to make them light," he said, and adds "The Cultural Ministry should help with the rallies. Even among the teachers, it is only a few that help or get involved in any way. Some have even been discouraging and sarcastic."



KAJOL, who was here from Copenhagen, as he always tries to be particularly in the month of Baishakh, talking at a

and Rokeya Hall *aidas* is really heartening. Despite being busy all the year, I make it a point to come to the procession as I get a chance to meet my old friends. I love looking at the traditional handicrafts with the age-old yellow, black and blue dhotis.



RAFI HAQUE, an artist known for his price comments, says, "I love the Bangla New Year as I get a chance to see senior artists who normally live abroad. Also, there are poets, writers, dramatists and musicians you do not meet normally. Again, you meet friends who have parted ways, e.g., girls who have got married. I also feel that during this time, people forget political differences and there is amity among the normally feuding people. The time I enjoyed best was two years back when I got to carry the 1,000 ft snake that Kajol made."



SUNIL HAWLADER, who helps run a 'tone' gallery, says, "I am glad that this day has nothing to do with religion. This is simply an outpouring of happiness, this is something which has reached us through transmission from generation rooted in the rural past. It is connected with *jatra, jari*, and horse-racing, with brass vessel, hurricane and torch light for prizes. Fattened, with painted horns, bulls are made to race too while cocks are made to fight. The other integral parts of the scenario in the Bangla New Year include clay-pots, bangles, *pitha*, leaf fans, and *murti*. There is a belief that if you eat well on this day, you will remain content and satisfied throughout the rest of the year."



ZAMIRUL ISLAM, a well-established commercial artist, says, "There should be something festive geared towards children, like plays, for example. I believe the Baishakh *mela* is not meant for the young ones. There could be children's painting competition at this time. Even

in the Shishu Park, the adults take over the scene. In Turkey, for instance, there is a five-storeyed building just to house games for children. Something similar could be accommodated here too. Again, everything is Dhaka-based, I believe, while the celebrations should reach the villages. Due to the crowds, I haven't ever managed to take my children to see the Baishakhi programmes."



SAYED HASAN MAHMUD, another successful young painter, adds, "People bring authentic clay-items from Mymensingh, Faridpur and Demrai but their works get mixed up with plastic items and cheap copies, which frustrates us and has no meaning or purpose for us. The BISIC should control the authenticity of the clay-pieces. Again, the Arts and Crafts rally get mingled with matters like decorated cow-carts. There should be fixed maps to identify regulated routes of rallies."

The artists are not complacent about their contributions to making the Pahela Baishakh a memorable day. They are realistic about the limitations of their efforts, but remain optimistic and enthusiastic on the whole. Their comments about the day are, as one can see, are quite brief, as they are used to expressing themselves through their handwork rather than in words.

Festivals We Had

Continued from page 10

cal Krishna with his thousands of *Gopis*, to which actually the festival owes for its origin. *Dolotsab* is still here but has taken only a marginal role in our cultural life. In India and Nepal — particularly in the latter — this is a national event and the people enjoy themselves as best as they can. The Nepalese enjoy a holiday for the purpose. Indeed, this colourful celebration could be a national festival for us too, for it has nothing to do with religion. Any secular event is worth an attempt for its revival.

Then there were boat-races — not the ones we now witness at the Buriganga being held with official patronage. Those were the real boat races participated spontaneously by village people. The course of the boat races was usually the vast expanses of water that submerged most villages and surrounding areas. Usually held in the months of Shrawan and Bhadra, this festival also brought people from different religions together. The water has receded, so has the festival that was both a sport and entertainment of high socio-cultural values. Called *bacherts* (yacht), the beautifully decorated long boats were built specially for the purpose. Apart from the rivalries between different boats leading occasionally to bloody feuds, those races came direct from the village heart.

Another occasion with religious stint but leaving enough room for people from different

communities to participate was the cow or horse race held on the occasion of *Bastu Puja* (a tribute to mother earth). Particularly appealing was the bonfire that used to light up the evening sky of villages. The rhythmic chanting of high-pitch traditional verse couplets specially dedicated to the occasion alongside the winding blazes rising up was almost an unreal ethereal experience. Only comparable to Hardy's depiction of such bonfires on the hilltops of English midlands. Equally sombre and soothing influences of *Aak Kata* (marking the harvest of paddy) made village life flow towards nature. If *Bastu Puja* marked the beginning of cultivation season, this cutting of a sheaf of paddy did for the harvest and *Nabanna*. Through these occasions people expressed their gratitude to nature for its bounties and blessings. Life renewed its inseparable bond with nature and thus flowed a most beautiful and vibrant life in Bengal.

Now all these events have almost vanished or retain just a subdued presence in our village life. The two Eids, Durga Puja, Christmas and Bouddha Purnima, according to the order, touch our lives in this land. The reasons are obvious. But their religious nature has not made them everyone's festival, however much we make a case in defence of their broader significance in life. It is the *Ekushey* February that has been the fountain-head of all our cravings for secular celebrations. A fight for language has given us a common cause — irrespective of our religious adherence — to transcend all the mental barriers to come to a meeting point. This has been ably matched by yet another attempt at concretising our secular ethos into the Baishakhi *Mela*. Although it began in the city, thanks to *Chhayano* — a musico-cultural organisation, it is fast spreading in villages. People are discovering the inner secular strength of the celebration of the occasion. This is a journey of the Bangalee mind to the most desired direction. But there is one blemish though, in that it has been replacing the *Chaitra Sankranti* *mela* which dates back to around 2,000 years. Better it would be if both the *Sankranti* and the Pahela Baishakh are celebrated together with enough scope for our traditional, cultural flourishing along with our secular cravings.



Celebrating Life: Welcoming Baishakh