

# Bengali Romance : Alive and Kicking

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

Romance — a two-syllable word demanding only a two-fold trip of the tongue — unfailingly thrills young lovers. True, romance is an experience which has survived an endless cycle of repetition over time, yet it never seems to lose its appeal. It still wafts up its alluring scent, and jazzes up its rhythm and resources in the life of a young lover. What is the nature of Bengali romance? What signs and symptoms, turns and twists, tones and tunes and texts do characterise Bengali romance in this part of the world? Answers here the author who zooms in on the urban romancescape in Bangladesh.

As the intoxicating smell of mango blossoms fill the air and the happy Kokil welcomes Baishakh with its song, the Bengali New Year brings with it a renewed promise of love. Whatever one's horoscope predicts, romance is in the horizon, almost as tangible as the fresh-pale-green leaves of the beginning of the spring.

For Bengalees, to whom pursuing romantic interludes is the next best thing to *adda* (gossip), love or *prem* has been very much part of their *Bangaleeness*. This is what can be found in their poetry, in their literature, in their songs, and in their drama. Over time however, the way the Bengalee has expressed his or her love has undergone a considerable number of mutations being influenced by whatever trend is romantically fashionable.

In the 'golden days', days our elders are so fond of recalling, love had very simplistic, subtle and even mystical connotations attached to it. A love-poem written on a stary

night comparing the beloved's face with the luminous moon, a shy smile from one's heart throbs or a coy batting of the eyelids, would be as bold as a lover could get in expressing a feeling so sacred and pure. Sometimes love consisted of desiring someone distant or remote like a star with no attempt of revealing such passion to the loved one; love thus remaining forever unrequited.

Today's lover is far more articulate and direct. For those very young, love is more than a natural phase of growing up. It is the sole preoccupation that keeps the young person away from the drudgery of school books, and that gives immunity against the disapproving glares of teachers and the chagrin of the over-protective parents. For the young Bengalees, pursuing 'matters of the heart' is a way of filling the void created by lack of any other channels of entertainment. With dull oppressive schools to look forward to and very few recreational activities to live

up their lives, how else can young people amuse themselves except by spending all their energy on something as exciting and effortless as falling in love?

All this has made a certain object sacred to the young person. This is the telephone set — a technological invention that has become the most crucial medium through which lovers communicate. Many times a romance has started (and ended) on the phone. Some have even professed their love on the telephone without even seeing each other face to face. This of course has led to quite a few disappointments as when the attractive young lady has found out that the Prince Charming she has given her heart to is not 5-10' (as claimed by him), but ten inches shorter and his 'healthiness' is actually another word for fat and with a paunch. Apart from such unpleasant consequences, most lovers find talking on the telephone the most pleasurable of activities. The phone seems so private (the young romantic often forgets that his 'I love you's' and 'I will die for you's' can be heard by a dozen other people, thanks to cross connections), and at the same time, makes the person on the other end so mysterious, and hence so attractive.

The young lover's four-to-eight-hour-long murmuring of sweet nothings, however, is a great bane for parents. With complaints from friends and relatives of finding the line continuously busy, parents often have to take drastic measures including imposing embargoes on the machine, five-minute limits, locking the phone, or simply cutting off the line that goes to the extension near the 'delinquent' child's room.

Funnily enough, such punishments do not deter the enterprising young lover, but in fact prompts him or her to use his (or her) ingenuity to thwart parental control such as by hiding an extra, unauthorised phone-set in the drawer, getting a duplicate key made, or even climbing up the walls to re-connect the phone-line extension.

There are other ways for the Bengali lover to initiate a romance. One very popular way is known as 'tanki mara', the closest translation of which would be the Bengali version of 'serenading'. Usually members of the opposite sex flirt with each other while pretending (to their parents of course) to stroll on the terrace. Initially the young lady will adopt a 'hard-to-get' attitude, looking but not looking at the ogling males on the next door roof. Later, if she likes what she sees, phone numbers may be exchanged through sign, language, and the ritual of romancing begins all over again.

It is interesting to see the alacrity with which young men will engage in this 'tanki mara' routine travelling miles, standing for hours in the sun or withstanding the vilest of insults thrown at them from protective *darwans*, all for the sake of catching one glimpse of, perhaps even a smile from, their lady-loves.

Those who have passed this stage and also exhausted the use of the phone may then take a step further and become

preoccupied with an activity known derisively as 'dating', although it may mean something a little different from the Western use of the word. With a tradition placing a taboo on the term plus the restrictive control exercised over young women 'dating' has become a game of hide-and-seek (with the parents, that is), half the thrill being in the secrecy involved. Popular dating spots include Crescent Lake, Dhanmondi Lake, Sangshad Bhavan, Boida Garden, New Airport and Ramna Park. Unfortunately, these are also the most visited haunts of hijackers, pestering street urchins and bored policemen who find it more interesting to harass young people rather than nab muggers and thieves. For some, the lack of places to go, to and the tension involved in trying not to get caught by parents make this rather dangerous game of dating just not worth the trouble, and hence it is back to the all-faithful, telephone set.

Yet whatever way young lovers wish to go about the business of romancing, one of the events most of them will not forget to attend is the Pahela Baishakh *mela*. Apart from reasserting their *Bangaliness* by wearing colourful cotton saris and *pajama-pyjama* and singing Rabindra Sangeet (inspite of the Z tv and BPL Ove invitation) young people from all walks of life use this opportunity to admire and be admired. Sometimes, the Baishakhi *mela* becomes the place of more lasting unions. This is in reference to the case of a certain young Bengali freelance photographer from Austin who, taking pictures of various scenes of the *mela*, decided to take a photo of a young Bengali woman from Switzerland hardly realizing that the nameless face amongst a hundred others would eventually become his lover for life. As we welcome the New Year with the song 'esho he Baishakh, esho, esho', we may also celebrate such lovers who have kept Bengali romance alive and kicking.

## Culture-friendly Development

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pursued by the entire nation, of course, in pluralistic and decentralised ways. Only then culture can become a lever for galvanising the economic process. However, there is always a danger of looking at culture in a myopic manner by both so-called nationalist (*a la* Hitler) and fundamentalist forces. In the latter case, this may indeed become a stumbling-block against progress rather than being a means of accelerating it. We need to be cautious about this context as well.

Though very delicate, each society has to undergo the vigorous exercise of people's participation with respect to what its people define as their objectives and how their culture establishes the criteria of organisation (Buarque, 1993). It does imply a sovereign approach to defining the objectives the society has set for itself. Copying others will not do. We must define our own priorities, our own objectives autonomously. We must come to a solid grip with what sort of progress our society desires to achieve. Here I feel we got to be really honest to the driving forces which created our strong heritage, heroic struggles, and to those agonising moments of coming together.

We in Bangladesh are quite lucky for inheriting a nation which has been shaped through a number of successful struggles led by the dedicated leadership. The struggles, though most often led by the more articulate middle class, had deep roots in the participation of the toiling masses, and hence, it will be quite legitimate if we always ask for people's wisdom in shaping what kind of progress we are looking for our society.

If we really want a sovereign approach to the de-

**I**n dire need of assistance for this piece, I blurted out to anyone who cared to listen. "Keyo ki bole parbe amra ki ki English words use kori Bangla bolar shomoi?" Instead of a helpful reply I got funny looks in return. "I think you have answered your own question," I was told. Predictably enough, my sentence, like most of my sentences in Bengali, was peppered with 'English words'. Was this affliction limited only to confused *bulesh* returnees or common to Bangladeshi society at large?

A simple survey reveals that as far as city dwellers are concerned, we rarely complete a sentence without using at least some English. This affliction has infiltrated all levels of society from shop salesmen to the elite.

Some English words are employed so often that most of us don't even know the Bengali equivalent. Even if we did, we would not think of using the corresponding version. There are plenty of examples in our everyday surroundings. How many of us say *kedara, uroha, haj, photok, or, pakha* instead of chair, plane, gate, or fan? Or *dakghor, chalachitra, and kiato* instead of post office, cinema and tired? Do we even have Bengali equivalents for words like 'table', 'television', 'beauty parlour', 'glass', 'ice cream', or 'powder'?

Turning to English does not mean that we are all trying to be cosmopolitan. Sometimes the English version is simply less awkward. Can you imagine going for *madhanno bakhon* instead of lunch, or *naisho bakhon* instead of dinner? It's just common sense, not *shadharan buddhi*.

People from different professions also have a pool of English words that have become indispensable for the job. Shop salesmen will go out of their way to assure you that something is not only first class, and original, but also fine. Moreover their products are always 'fresh', whether they be food, clothes or books.

Drivers with a *chakka jam* can't start the *gari*. Electricians who can't get the 'light on and off' and replace the 'fuse', are just as useless. And how would the poor lawyer deal without words like, 'hereinafter, thereafter and hereunder'?

Our middle class families commonly sprinkle English during a normal conversation.

# Speaking Bengali the English Way

by Lamis Hossain

It seems that some of the urban, middle-class Bengalees have much difficulty completing a sentence without having to use some English words, at least. Is this lexical chemistry destroying our mother tongue? The author here looks at how some of the foreign words are reflexively (mis?)appropriated here and there in the language used in a uniquely Bangladeshi way.

*Amra in jagai used to hoje giactu, lili in khub enjoy korchi* or "Mind korben na kintu." The word 'use itself is used too generously. Some people just don't have proportion *gaar*."

We are so confident of our assimilation of the English language that we have even devised new applications for words. Does anyone outside the subcontinent ever say 'the current's gone?' (then again, the need hardly arises) Only in Bangladesh would your driver say, 'Khalamma, we should avoid this road. There is a gathering ahead.' What a botheration!

It seems that spoken Bangla is simply infested with a foreign language which is slowly gnawing away at the very reason behind our independence. Should we not defend the mother tongue? Where do we put our foot down?

If this were France, the cultural guardians would be packing back and forth issuing directives by now. The French, it seems, are highly concerned about the adverse influence coming from across the English channel and the Atlantic. France is edgy about

foreign songs on the radio, an invasion by Hollywood blockbusters and the mutilation of the French language. The younger French generation use words such as weekend, cheeseburger, cool, and shopping without even thinking about it, much to the worry of the older folks. To make sure that such uncivilised phrases do not creep into official documents, there was an attempt last year to put an end to it. One would thus have to fish for the corresponding French word or invent a French version.

But even the French have discovered that controlling what people say is nearly impossible. Many French people simply didn't see the point in choosing a more cumbersome phrase, if a catchy foreign one is understood by all. Isn't the word weekend simply less maladroit than *fin de semaine*?

Then there is the question of practicality. French scientists were apparently worried about the fact that inventing new French terms might cause confusion, and that it can slow down the information exchange with other countries. The same reasons would

apply in our case. Lawyers interviewed about the merit of discontinuing English in our courts pointed out the problems of finding/inventing the Bengali version of legal terms. There are words that do not exist in Bengali. In some cases, however, a new Bengali invention for an English word may take off. In India, the word *Doordarshan*, created to correspond to television, has found a wide acceptance.

English is also the chosen language for business around the world. English is the language by which we can keep abreast of international developments. We have thus have little to gain from being paranoid.

A language's ability to embrace new terms means that it can remain dynamic. Only languages which are secure about their worth can rejuvenate themselves in this way. The charm of English is that it has adopted words from countless cultures without compromising the identity of the English language. Subcontinental words have also found their way into this vocabulary: *har-tals, lathicharge, goondas, and chamcha* are some of the exports (why are they all negative?).

We have already embraced countless Arabic and Persian words which we would never think of erasing from Bengali today: *mehman, daawat, murubbi, khajana, and dalil* are but a few names. So why turn the clock back and weed out everything foreign? A great language like Bengali should be able to turn outside influences to its own advantage. We know Bengali can.



Celebrating Life : Baishakhi Procession

# Are You a True Bengalee?

by Rashida Ahmad

- Can you sing Rabindra Sangeet?
    - Yes
    - I think I know some of the songs.
    - Never heard of it
  - Do you complain that it's too hot in the summer, and that it's too cold in the winter?
    - Yes
    - No, I love winter
    - No, I love summer
  - Do you hate seeing anyone more successful than yourself?
    - Yes
    - Not hate, more like dislike
    - There are few people more successful than me
  - Do you actually enjoy spitting on the street whenever you can?
    - Yes
    - No, but it's sometimes necessary
    - Yuk, I use a handkerchief if I really must
  - Do you like 'bel' fruit?
    - Yes
    - It's an acquired taste
    - Who's he?
  - Do you have any read-sense whatsoever?
    - Yes
    - Yes, but no-one else on the street seems to
    - Not enough to drive here
  - Do you just drop rubbish on the ground wherever you happen to be?
    - Yes
    - No, I first find a pile of rubbish
    - No, I take it home and put it in the bin
  - Do you avoid the sun in case you turn darker?
    - Yes
    - Well, I'm not obsessive about it
    - No, I want to be darker
  - Do you know what an 'alna' is?
    - Yes
    - Yes, but we have wardrobes in our house
    - Is that Latin?
  - Have you read Golpo Gutchho?
    - Yes
    - No, but I really should get round to it
    - What is it?
  - Men: Do you wear Hawaii shirts with checked lungis?
    - Yes
    - No, I have quite good dress sense actually
    - I don't wear lungis
  - Women: Do you always wear your sari with kutchees?
    - Yes
  - Sometimes I wear it 'ek pache', just for a change
    - Huh?
  - What's the date today?
    - Pahela Baishakh
    - Actually, now you mention it, it's the Bengali New Year today
    - April 14 1995
  - Do you always use a 'badna' in the bathroom?
    - Yes
    - Sometimes I use toilet paper, it depends
    - I don't understand the question
  - When you hear the word 'Sonargaon' do you think of a hotel?
    - No
    - Oh, you mean it's also our ancient capital
    - The Sonargaon Pan Pacific, yes, why?
  - Do you respond to the call of nature wherever you happen to be?
    - Yes
    - Only in cases of dire need
    - I try not to respond to any calls of nature
  - Do you find back-biting a pleasurable past-time?
    - Yes
    - Only if I don't like a particular person
    - I prefer to eavesdrop on others back-biting
  - How many days holiday should be allowed per year? More than 360?
    - Yes
    - That's a bit excessive
    - Two and a half weeks plus sick-leave
  - Do you find it difficult to appreciate the good things in life?
    - Yes
    - Only when I'm with others
    - No, I always look on the bright side of things
  - Does your self image involve seeing yourself as somewhat of a tiger/tigress?
    - Yes
    - Sometimes, but I don't think others see me in that light
    - Please, you're embarrassing me
  - Do you believe that in order to earn respect from others, you must be invariably rude and dogmatic at all times?
    - Yes
    - With certain people
    - Of course not
- ANSWERS:  
All a's — Congratulations, you are a true Bengali  
Mostly b's — Pseudo-Bengali  
All c's — Foreigner

## Pahela Baishakh

(A RENEWAL)

by Waliur Rahman

You came early in the day  
With a movement happy and gay,  
I noted the familiar ring  
On the finger I put it in.

The ring looks worn and gray  
It helped you keep them at bay  
In the journey long and full  
With mighty khajars darted in wool.

A mock queen, a long-forgotten ghost  
Egomaniac elaborate jumble is lost  
Gliding the staircase murderously fast  
Holding in vain the bough as a mast.

April's cruelty pains us all  
With Rococo fancy's shimmering wall.  
The incarnate of the king dead,  
Cohabit with concubines he made.

Fourteenth April, a month and day  
Purim's spring happy and gay  
Soft and supple caring and prim  
The door ajar you came in my dream.



## Pahela Baishakh: Random Thoughts

by Gemini Wahhaj

**Akdiner Bangali** (Bangali for a day)

Suddenly, Dhaka is transformed into a city of *pajamas* and *punjabis*. Gone are the smartly dressed Bangali men in western clothes.

"Wow, man!" they congratulate each other under the banyan tree, "you look cool!" Then they dig into a plate of fermenting rice and fish. "Cool, man, great to be a Bangali," they say.

It is precisely such behaviour that gives vent to a *khaniti* (authentic) Bangali's anger. "Akdiner Bangali!" he shouts apoplectically. And then you have the young woman struggling with a *saree* and four *fluris* of safety pins. "Help, help!" she shouts, "I think I put a pin through my stomach!"

"Hnnh," snorts the middle-aged veteran *saree*-wearer. "Why show off in a *saree* when you don't wear one everyday?" The torch-bearers of Bengali culture might frown a little at the explosion of ostentatious *Bangaliness* on Pahela Baishakh. But as for the rest of us, the so-called *akdiner Bangalis*, our behaviours might seem a little strange, but the

feelings are authentic. As *baishakhi* showers shake *amro mikuls* off mango trees, and *Tugore* songs fill the air, as the *Ramna* park fills up with crowds of red and white *sarees*, white *punjabis*, and so, so many flowers, we can't help but say out loud: "Glad to be a Bangali!"

**In Time For Pahela Baishakh**

A cousin who got married recently said, "Now I can celebrate Pahela Baishakh properly!"

Is Pahela Baishakh then something akin to Valentine's Day? The 1st of Baishakh is more than just a new year, it is a celebration of *Bangla* culture. And only one word can describe the very essence of *Bangaliness*: romance. There is romance in the spring showers, the *shuital* flower garlands in the young women's hair, our songs, our poetry, the clink of red and white glass bangles, the young man dressed in a white *punjab* and a *shawl* over his shoulder, the sweet air of an early Bangali morning, and even *panta bhat*.

Hmm, As Baishakh nears, we're filled with self-love

(flowers in our hair, cool cotton *sarees*, *nupur* on our ankles), and with love for *Bangla*. It's not surprising, with so much love floating around, that there might be some expectation (especially among young people) of a little romance.

As the wild spring winds dance on the streets, who knows, what might happen?

**Missing you, Bangladesh**

It's very difficult to describe the essence of being a Bangali, until one goes abroad. So take a Bangali out of her country, perhaps to the south of France, or Venice.

"Tell me, Bangali," you ask her, "with so much magic all around you, what ails you?" "It's spring," she says. "In Bangladesh now, windows are breaking in hailstorms, and mangoes are falling off trees. I want some *kaacha aam* (unripe mango)."

Then there are the tamard *chutney* and *jhal muri* outside your school-gates, chicken in backyards, sighting a full moon from your rooftop, a silent boat ride on dirty waters, having tea made from tea leaves. It's very strange, what a Bangali misses when he's out of Bangladesh.

