

Searching for our roots in melas

by Farida Akhter

The middle class is essentially alienated from 'his' or 'her' own society. But they have all the hegemonic arrogance in defining 'Bengali culture' in a manner that is creating contradictions and antagonisms and is manifest in our political culture as well. Perhaps, it is time to rediscover ourselves in order to redefine what we are and what we wish to be.



Colourful masks (a traditionally popular item of Baishakhi Mela) is chosen for celebration procession.

BAISHAKHI Mela is common in the country's different areas. The *adivasi* (aboriginal) community of the hill tracts, especially Chakmas, Marmas and Rakhaines, have their Biju Utsab. The *adivasis* of the plain land also have their own festivals in Baishakhi. In Baishakhi all religious groups such as Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and small cultural communities welcome the New Year according to their own traditions. Yet, Baishakhi Mela has its own special appeal.

For the business community, the major feature of the Pahela Baishakhi celebrations is the *Hal Khata*, a tradition of opening new account and settling the old one. Distribution of sweets marks the entry into a new year of business. Every customer and visitor to the shop or the business enterprise is considered as 'a blessing from the God'.

The *Halkhata* is a very old tradition in this region. In the old days business meant exchange of goods and services, or the barter system. The farmers exchanged surplus crops for other goods and services. But they had to calculate the surpluses they had and goods they needed in exchange, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. For this they used methods such as knots in the ropes

and collections of small stones. Also, there was the use of *tal paata* (palm leaf) or handmade papers. The present system is with a book covered with red cloth. The traditional businessmen are very emotional about the *Halkhata*.

Although we are more familiar with *melas* (fairs) on the Bengali New Year's Day or Pahela Baishakhi, melas of Bengal are unique on account of their history, spiritual and/or religious significance and local traditions and rituals. It's a complex institution and difficult to generalise.

During the full moon, i.e. Purnima, the Buddhist community celebrates the *Bodhidhara Mela*. This is a religious celebration also known as *Baishakhi Purnima*, because on this day Lord Buddha has attained *bodhi* or wisdom. The melas are held at the Kamalapur Buddha Bihar and in other places, especially in Chittagong.

In the Ranishakoli Thana of Thakurgaon of North Bengal there is a village called Nekmorod-Faridpara. The village is named after Syed Nekmorod, a saint of the 15th century. His actual name was Syed Nasiruddin. He was very pious and known for his personal integrity and wisdom. People called him *nekmorod* meaning the holy person. During

Baishakhi, there is *urs* on the death anniversary of Nekmorod. People come to pay respect to him from distant places. A weeklong fair is held starting from the first day of Baishakhi on this occasion. This is the biggest *meta* in North Bengal.

In the month of Jaitsha, the *Langalbandh Mela* takes place on the occasion of a Hindu religious festival. This is related to the story of the birth of the river Brahmaputra, the son of Brahma. It is believed that the bathing in the river Brahmaputra on the eighth day of the month in the month of Jaitsha will wash away the sin. People from all over the country comes to the river Brahmaputra in the area known as Langalbandh in Narayanganj. Men and women of all ages gather on the bank of the river and take bath in the river water. This is a big festival and people from all walks of life participate.

The *Burashib Mela* or the Old *Shib Mela* is held in Champaibaganj and Phoolpur. This mela is of long duration, at least 15 days from the day of Buddha Purnima. In Phoolpur the mela lasts for a month near the Chiria Bander area starting from the first day of Baishakhi. In Phoolpur, this mela is called *Banni Mela*. Everything is sold here except cows and goats. This is strictly prohibited.

Muslims, especially those belonging to the Shiites sect, observe the 10th day of Muharram (the first in Hijri calendar) in the sad memory of Karbala where Imam Hussain along with thousands of others died in the war against Yazid. As a strategy, passage to the River Euphrates was blocked. People and little children died in thirst. *Muharram Melas* are held in Dhaka's Azimpur area, Kushtia, Rajshahi, Brahmanbaria, Comilla, and Manikganj. At Mithapukur in Rangpur, a two-day mela is held on the occasion of Muharram. There is a well in which catfish of different sizes appear during the mela and die. Funeral for the catfish is also held.

The *Rath Melas* are well known to the people of all religion, even though this mela is held in the memory of Hindu God Jagannath's *Rath Yatra*. The biggest *Rath Yatra* is held at Dhamrai in Manikganj. Major attractions of the mela are the sweets like *amriti* and *jlapi*. Besides, all other handicraft products made of clay, copper, brass, etc. are available. The mela is held during the first and second weeks of the month of Ashar.

The *Gorai Tipir Mela* is held at the shrine of a Muslim saint in Kushtia from the 7th to 13th Ashar. The *Melas* on the occasion of

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boat race or *nouka batch* during the rainy season is one of the main attractions of the year. In the month of *Sraban*, when the rivers are full, such boat races are held at different parts of the country. A big mela is held on the Buriganga in Dhaka. In Kishoreganj, *nouka batch* is held on the first day of *Bhadra*. A grand mela is held in the area called Nikli and is called Nikli Mela. In Rajshahi, the *nouka batch* is held in an area called Hamidpur along with the Hamidpur Mela.

The Dhakeshwari Temple is very famous in Dhaka. It was built in the 17th century. *Maharaja Mansingh* built the temple after he defeated the King of Bikrampur. He established the deity of the goddess Shilamoyi. This is known as Dhakeshwari. On the 7th day of the moon in the month of *Ashwin*, a one-day mela is held at the Dhakeshwari Mandir.

The *Premtali Mela*, held in the village Premtali in Rajshahi, is a big occasion for the followers of *Sadak Sri Chaitanya Gour*. This mela is to celebrate the memory of Shri Chaitanya who visited the village *Pretal* and took bath in the river *Padma*. Every year on the 20th day of *Ashwin*, the mela is held. People from all walks of life, especially *Vaishnabs* and *Bairagis*, visit the mela. They take bath in *Padma* river and pay respect in the temple located in the village *Khetur*. The interesting part of the mela is that besides selling different handicraft items, there is a big supply of molasses, garlic, onion, chili and tamarind.

The *Sureshwar Urs Mela* is held in the memory of Muslim saint *Jan Sharif*.

Among the Hindus, Melas are held during the full moon of *Falgun* on the religious occasion of *Dol Yatra*. It is also called *Dol Purnima*. Melas are held in Shaikupura, Kotchandpur, Jessor, Nokla, Jamalpur, etc. on the occasion of *Charak Puja*.

Bengal is known for *baro mashey tero parbon* that is, thirteen festivals in the span of twelve months. However, while *parbon* symbolises the ritualistic aspect of festivity, mela usually marks the coming together of the community in a geographical space and time.

There are obviously more festivals almost every month. These festivals have relevance to the seasons and to the religious and cultural activities of the people. Festivals are for people. They encourage local handicraft and traditional music, but most importantly they contribute to the generation of popular discourse, ethics and rituals that binds the society together. Almost all melas have direct relevance with the rivers, rainfall, crops, forests, moon and the skills of the people. Therefore, the ecological significance of mela and parbon is simply enormous. Hardly have we done any study on these issues.

In addition, the dominant middle class is essentially alienated from his or her own society. But they have all the hegemonic arrogance in defining 'Bengali culture' in a manner that is creating contradictions and antagonisms and becoming manifested in our political culture as well.

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The melas can be an excellent beginning.

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And then there was the proud Bangladeshi who thought she needed more exposure to Bangladeshi history to really appreciate it. She seemed torn between two cultures: the culture she was born into and the

culture she acquired. Farida Bhuiya, 17, Maryland USA, said: "Having grown up in America, I didn't get complete exposure to Bengali culture, and even less of Bangladeshi history. It's not that Pohela Baishakhi is unimportant; it's just that we don't hear about it enough."

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The guilt-ridden, almost apologetic ones were also among the interviewees.

"I did not have the opportunity to celebrate the day for the last four years. It's sad but true that I forgot the day last year, until a friend e-mailed to remind me. I feel it's a very important day and it is important for us to remember its importance. I feel guilty forgetting about it, not being able to celebrate it with the enthusiasm that I should. But living abroad makes it difficult to remember such things -- life, after all, is very fast-paced and flies by, before you even realise it," Fuad Zaman, 24, Loyola University, Chicago, IL, USA, said.

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