

# 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.

**B**AISHAKHI Mela is common in the country's different areas. The *adivasi* (aboriginal) community of the hill tracts, especially Chakmas, Marmas and Rakhmas, have their Biju Utshab. The *adivasis* of the plain land also have their own festivals in Baishakh. In Baishakh 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 Baishakh 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 surplus 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 Baishakh*, *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 *Bodhi-hidrum 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 Kamalpur Buddha Bihar and in other places, especially in Chittagong.

In the Ranishakol 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

Baishakh, 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 Baishakh on this occasion. This is the biggest *mela* in North Bengal.

In the month of Jaistha, the *Langabandh 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 moon in the month of Jaistha will wash away the sin. People from all over the country comes to the river Brahmaputra in the area known as Langabandh in Narayanjan. 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.

*Burashib Mela* or the Old Shib Mela is held in Chhainabaganj 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 Chirir Bander area starting from the first day of Baishakh. 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 Shites 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 *amrit* and *jilapi*. 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.

*Melas* on the occasion of

boat race or *nouka baich* 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 baich* 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 baich* is held in an area called Hamidpur along with the Hamidpur Mela.

The Dhakeswari 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 Dhakeswari. On the 7th day of the moon in the month of Ashwin, a one-day *mela* is held at the Dhakeswari Mandir.

The *Premtali Mela*, held in the village Premtali in Rajshahi, is a big occasion for the followers of *Sadhak 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, chilli and tamarind.

On the occasion of *Kali Puja* or *Shayma Puja*, a great religious festival for the Hindu community, different *melas* are held in the month of Kartik for a period of about 15 days. In contrast to other *melas*, the *Kali Melas* are held in dark nights. The most important *melas* are held in Khokshar-Joinpur bazaar in Kushtia on the bank of the river Gorai. The tradition of holding these *melas* is 300 years old. Other significant *melas* on this occasion are held in Gopalganj, Dinajpur, Khulna and Comilla. In Dhaka, the *Kali Melas* are held in Tantibazar and in Chittagong, it is held in Hazari Lane. In these *melas*, there is a particular emphasis on selling ornaments, coloured ribbons and different kinds of cosmetic items for young girls.

The first day of Kartik is the death anniversary of Fakir Lal Shah, a very famous saint of Bengal. In the shrine of Lal Shah, located at Sherrie, a village in Kumarkhali Thana of Kushtia, there is a big gathering of Lal Shah followers and *sadhaks* from all over the country. Even people from across the border join in. For three days the *mela* continues. The *sadhaks* have their own rituals during the *mela*.

The *Orakandi Mela* is held in Madhabpur of Sylhet on the occasion of Rashila, a Hindu festival.

The most common festival for the rural people irrespective of their religions is the *Poush Mela* held on the occasions of the new paddy in the farming households. With new paddy a lot of delicacies are prepared. These *melas*, often known as *Nabannaya Mela*, feature musical programmes through the night.

One significant *mela* held on

this occasion is at Panshipara, a village in Lalpur thana of Rajshahi. This is held on the first day of Poush. *Shadhak Gosai* introduced the *mela* almost 250 years back. He used to feed people with *paesh*, a sweet dish prepared with new rice. The tradition still prevails. The main items include different *pitras* (cakes) made of new rice.

*Bou Mela* or the bride festival is held for a week in Dinajpur from 19 to 25 Poush. In this *mela*, selling of cows is prohibited. Though it is called *Bou Mela*, no particular link is found with the bride. Rather the story is about a saint who was drowned in the lake with a pot of hot *paesh* in his hand. But when his body was found floating, the pot of *paesh* was still in his hands which was still warm.

In Chittagong, there are three great Sufis in an area called Maiz Bhandar. They are Hazrat Shah Sufi Ahmedullah, Hazrat Shah Sufi Golamur Rahman and Hazrat Shah Sufi Aminul Huq.

*Melas* are held on the occasion of the death anniversary of Hazrat Shah Sufi Ahmedullah who died on 10 Magh in 1313. *Melas* are also held for the birth and death anniversary of the other two Sufis, but those are held in the month of Chaitra.

In Boakhal, Rangamat, a three-day *Mela* is held on full moon nights of Magh in the memory of Lord Buddha.

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 Shaikupa, Kotchandpur, Jessore, 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 being manifested 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.

The *melas* can be an excellent beginning.

## Lost Ties

Nadine Murshid writes from Virginia, USA

**I**T'S that day again. The day Bengalis all over celebrate the advent of the Bengali New Year; the day, which, for the ordinary Bengali masses spell fun and festivities; the day, which, for most expatriate Bengalis is another working day and for most Bangladeshi students abroad, either a time for reminiscence or a day forgotten.

A whole new generation, Generation Y, as they are called, has emerged since the war. They are causing a major stir in terms of suppliers and companies trying to take advantage of such a huge market; in fact, they are the ones who are actually driving the market. But that is of no concern today. What is of concern is the fact that most of them are blissfully unaware of their identity, their culture, their heritage, and most of all, themselves. And where Bangladeshis living abroad are concerned, they make an 'interesting breed' to say the least.

Speaking to some of the Bangladeshi New-Generation kids residing outside Bangladesh, it was obvious that while some were totally under false impressions about *Pahela Baishakh* and even our Independence Day, others proved to be quite knowledgeable than one would expect them to be.

Some made valid points and the ones who knew nothing

about their past either blamed their parents, blamed no one and on one occasion, blamed themselves.

Said Rizwana Rahman, a 22-year-old student at the University of Western Sydney, Australia: "I know nothing about all this. I was partly raised in Bangladesh and then we moved to Australia. After I came here I adapted with the culture here and forgot half of what I learnt in Bangladesh. So I guess, I am to blame for my ignorance, not my parents, because they did their duty when we were in Bangladesh and it's my fault that I couldn't hold on to them, or retain whatever that I learnt as a child."

Another seemed bitter because he couldn't stay in

Bangladesh even though he wanted to. "I don't think *Pohela Baishakh* matters for people like us who live abroad. When I went back to Bangladesh after graduating from a high school in Kuwait, they never gave me admission at the university there—they demanded I pay tuition for international students. So, I figured, it's culture and heritage, for me, meant nothing at all, because I couldn't and didn't benefit from it."

Plabon Mohammad Izmail, 20, Ontario, Canada, said, "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 Baishakh* is unimportant; it's just that we don't hear about it enough."

"I have two cultures -- so my regards for each are split into two. It may sound a little obnoxious, but it's true."

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 im-

portant 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."

Quaid Zaman, 24, Loyola University, Chicago, IL, USA, said,

"There is one ideal daughter of ideal parents, who actually took the time to teach their daughter about herself and her identity. Much to the surprise of many, she can read and write Bengali with dexterity and can even sing Rabindra Sangeet, something which is unheard of for most Bangladeshi children living abroad."

"Since I've never lived in Bangladesh, I've never been able to experience the feeling of belonging that the rest of the country feels. However, I've always felt a great attachment to Bangladesh because of the notions that my parents have instilled in me -- telling me as well as showing me that there was a lot about my country to be proud of. I love my country, even though I haven't been brought up there -- thanks to my parents who have taken the time and energy to make me realise who I am. It is because of them that I am proud to say I am Bangladeshi."

Moona Shams, 16, John Fraser Secondary School, Ontario, Canada, said,

"And like every survey has its 'typical' man, there was the one who knew it all, loved it all."

"*Pahela Baishakh* should be a time for us to rejoice the precious gift we have got: our status as Bengalis. Bangla has a rich tradition; a rich culture and dates back to a few thousand years. It is a time for us to reach out for our roots; to express our love for our *Bangladeshi*; and be proud of what we have achieved. The martyrs that made Bangladesh possible: fought not only for an independent land, but also for a language -- Bengali. We have to maintain that respect for our language."

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## Shubha Nababarsha

Continued from page 4

ideas in those cards and even special prizes are awarded for the best layout or designs. The postal department is to declare special weeks for posting those cards in order to avoid heavy rush.

But where is our *Nababarsha* cards? I feel that these cards with quotations, poems or messages of our beloved poets and writers will fly like a pigeon of peace from door to door. It receives such cards and letters I can keep those in my drawing room. And, with a heart full of happiness and pride, I can show those to my friends and relatives and say: Look, these cards have come from Rangpur, Chittagong, Mymensingh, Tangail, Khulna and Dhaka. These are from London, New York and Paris with the smell and adoration of folkloric seven seas and thirteen rivers!

Who is that artist or dreamer who will come forward with such an idea!

Let our *Nababarsha* messages fly East, Middle East and Far East, from Asia to Europe, from Europe to America ... to our near and dear ones ... to our brothers and sisters ... to our unknown friends all over the world ... to the people who live in the deserts ... on the hills and mountains ... in the far islands and seas...



Street painting (alpana — a Bengali tradition) marks the celebration of Nababarsha.

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