

Pahela Baishakh

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Our moorings

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ALONG with its sustenance, the culture of Bangladesh draws many of its colours and characteristics from nature. The economy of the country is predominantly agricultural, and more than ninety per cent of its population live in the scattered villages. The methods of agriculture have changed, but

quest and rejection have been the key-note of much that has been thought and expressed. Sweetness and harmony are preferred to energy and discordance.

The very nature, character and composition of the forms of art have been determined, to a large extent, by nature. Stones, for example, are not easy to obtain. Hence, architecture and

communities, the entire population speaks Bengali, but the regional dialects are many and differences in pronunciation and intonation are in no way negligible. In the past, Bangladesh was ruled by kings who came from outside. They built their own courts and developed a courtly culture. But this culture was unable to spread itself beyond the capital cities.

Rural Bengal preserved and practised its own cultural values and forms, uninterrupted by the change of rulers. It was the life and experience of the peasantry that provided the various art forms with the basic material. The performers have been amateurs in the sense that they are not full-time professionals and also because they are not trained in any institutions.

Music is the most outstanding and distinctive form of artistic expression in Bangladesh. The instruments used are indigenous - they include string and percussion instruments, and also flutes. The two important kinds of vocal music are the Bhatiyali and the Bhawaiya. The Bhatiyali is sung by the boatmen of eastern and southern Bengal, the Bhawaiya is the song of cartmen in northern Bengal. Needless to say the songs are in no way confined to men of these two professions, they are popular with people of almost every walk of life. The two kinds of songs are different from each other, and yet they have a similarity in their themes of love and loveliness and also in the informality and full-throatedness with which they are sung. There

are also songs connected with the ceremonies of the two principal religions, Islam and Hinduism, changes in the seasons of the year - Bengal has as many as six - are celebrated in songs. The mendicants, who travel from one place to another have their own form of songs, containing ideas relating to the experiences of the soul. Women sing their own kinds of compositions on occasions like wedding, ear-piercing, and harvesting. Folk tales of Bangladesh are rich in both passion and humour, and they illustrate the closeness of man to nature. The folk tradition is oral, and it represents, in its creation and preservation, the collective good sense of the people.

Dances in Bangladesh are connected with the religious

ceremonies. But among the tribal people in the border areas dances are a part of every-day life. Their music is also different from that of the mainland.

There is in Bangladesh an open-air theatre called the Yatra which provides popular entertainment to large gatherings through enactment of plays that are interspersed with songs and dances. The stories are well-known to the audience, the excellence of the performances depends on the skill in execution. The triumph of good over evil is displayed, and tragedy is generally avoided.

Religion has been an integral part of the life of the Bengalees, with Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism playing their two-fold roles of working as a unifying bond and providing the people

with occasions for festivities. Religious functions, some of them daily, some annual, bring the adherents together; and even social functions, like the wedding, take on a religious character. But until the coming of the British, who were instrumental in the heightening of religious tension, there was a tolerance between the followers of different religions in keeping with the peace-loving nature of the Bengalee peasantry. Islam was spread through the missionaries and not by any militant rulers; Hinduism was not

interests of the Hindu and the Muslim bourgeois, leading to communal disturbances and killings; and it was this conflict which was ultimately responsible for the partition of Bengal.

After the partition of the subcontinent, Bangladesh became a part of Pakistan, and the Pakistani rulers, in seeking the perpetuation of their rule, tried to engineer the creation of a new culture which they called Islamic and which ran contrary to the spirit of the traditional culture of the country. The attempt was resisted by the

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very slowly, almost reluctantly. Harvests are no less gift of nature than a product of human labour. The annual monsoons are a determining factor as are the intertwining rivers which bring destructive inundations together with fertilising deposits of silts. Most of the land is fertile and flat, and cultivation is easy.

Nature, which is yet to be conquered and controlled, figures prominently in almost all expressions of the cultural urges in Bangladesh. A warm and spontaneous response to the environment is readily available. The fertility of the land has generated a fertility in creative imagination, and the comparative easiness of life has communicated itself to the content as well as the style of the art forms. Spiritualism, mysticism, and feeling of otherworldliness and melancholy originating from the knowledge of impermanence of things form some of the characteristic themes treated in the art and literature of Bangladesh. Compromise, adjustment and accommodation rather than struggle, con-

sculpture have not been important forms of artistic creation. The climate and the soil have made it difficult to preserve the artefacts. Painting was unable to flourish in the past owing to both non-availability of materials and the problem of preservation. Handicrafts have been useful from both utilitarian and artistic points of view. But their market was limited because of the lack of adequate means of communication. Works of clay, wood, silk and cotton yarn have provided the artisans with means of livelihood as well as joys of creation. Women have tried to embody their imagination in works of embroidery and in the making of cakes.

Geographically, and also politically, Bengal had tended to be isolated from the rest of India. Within Bengal the villages, which were the units of social life, have been separated from each other. As a result the culture of Bangladesh remained different from that of northern India, and there are in the pattern of its own culture local variations of many kinds. With the exception of very small tribal



Traditional musical soiree welcoming the Bengali new year

PHOTO STAR

In Bangladesh today the folk and the modern traditions continue side by side; modernist schools of painting, music and dance have been developed; and professionalism has also entered the arena of culture. Modern means of mass communication are playing their useful roles.

even interested in winning converts; Buddhism went further ahead in preaching renunciation. As practised in Bangladesh these religions are less ritualistic than elsewhere.

Culturally, the most significant contribution of the British rule in Bengal was the creation of a middle class. This class introduced certain cultural elements and tendencies which can be conveniently assigned the name of modernism. It was responsible for the forging of the Bengali prose, a form that the Bengali language lacked, despite a rich history and heritage of poetry. The new bourgeoisie took to literature with a great deal of interest and developed certain new forms, such as the novel and the blank verse. The modern theatre, modelled after the European theatre, and the modern Bengali song, which stands in between the classical and folk traditions, were also created by this class. The Bengali middle class felt the need for and struggled for, the achievement of independence. But there arose, in course of this struggle, a conflict between the

collective good sense of Bangladesh of which its youth was the spokesman. In February 1952 a movement called The Language Movement was launched. This movement had far reaching consequences inasmuch as it gave the politics of the country a very distinctive secular and democratic bias. It brought the Muslims and Hindus together, and it inaugurated a new spirit of creativity which left its mark in almost all branches of art and literature. Bangladesh was established as an independent state in the culmination of the process that began with the Language Movement and, in a larger sense, in fulfilment of the inherent and characteristic cultural urges of its people.

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Baishakh in Bengali Poetry

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THE infinite variety of subject matter of Bengali is, indeed, something to be proud of, something that has earned for our literature an enviable place among the literatures of the world. One aspect of this variety is that our literature, more so our poetry, pictures nature in its various shades and colours, its variegated patterns and dimensions with changes that couple with changes in seasons. Our seasons are more in number than those in Europe or America. These 'numerous' seasons have been stimulant of numerous poetical works devoted to their glorification since ancient times. The sense of colour, taste, smell, sound and touch, in a word the sensuousness of the poets, has gained adequate satisfaction in the enjoyment of natural beauty which in its turn has found eloquent expression in these works. In order to express their intimate feelings feelings of love and devotion, of sorrow and separation the poets have made use of different seasons, literally and symbolically. In all literary works, particularly in the lyrical ones, nature has figured prominently to give vent to human heart though different poets have dealt with or interpreted nature in different ways. The seasons and the months that reflect the changes in nature have constituted the themes of

poetry from the very beginning of the literary history of the world and ours is no exception to it.

Time is immeasurable and indivisible. Yet to measure the immeasurable and to divide the indivisible, man has invented some units like second, minute, hour, day, week, month and year for practical purposes and to his

characterised by noticeable differences from one another with peculiar impact that each of them makes on the human mind and life. A mirror of human mind and life, literature is bound to reflect these distinctive features of different seasons of the year. The distinctive feature of nature embodies the changes that take place in differ-

of the year, has not found as prominent a place in Bengali poetry as it seems to have deserved. May be the Bengali poet's bent of mind which has profound affinity with peace, serenity and composure is ill at ease with the violent and elemental forces that Baishakh lets loose oftener than not. This is however, an issue that is to be delved deep into by scholars and researchers. Whatever be the reasons, the first of Baishakh or even the month of Baishakh fails to figure markedly in our poetry.

The first modern poet and the only successful epic poet of Bengali literature Michael Modhusudan Dutt has penned no poem on Baishakh though he has written a good number poems on other seasons of the year to add to the wide variety of his creation. The poets, like Hemchandra Nabinchandra, Kaikobad, Siraji, Hamid Ali followed the suit of Michael.

The greatest of the Bengali poets Rabindranath Tagore was born in the month of Baishakh. Yet compared to the voluminous works he gifted us, Baishakh's share is rather modest. Baishakh brings in the simmering summer when whole nature takes on appearance, thirsty, fiery and violent with almost all waterbodies drying up and looking eagerly for clouds to shower with blissful torrents so that dying nature revives. But the nor-wester (Kul Baishakhi) lashes cause destruction and

havoc with heavy tolls of life and property making human existence miserable and painful. This seriously terrifying aspect of Baishakh is dealt with excellently in the poem of the same title by Tagore. He has delineated the violent and destructive character of Baishakh with the help of the image of Shiva (Bhairab) the mythological god of destruction. Tagore has not stopped short of writing the poem '25th Baishakh' to bring to light his birth-day thoughts. These poems have witnessed nature as a living entity an irresistibly dynamic force that not only annihilates the old but also hastens to create the new thus ensuring the continuity of life. His 'Barshashesh' (The end of the year) simultaneously depicts the picture of the advent of the new year and pronounces its invocation so much so that it may be said to be a song of welcome.

It is axiomatic that Rabindranath has handed down tradition in whatever themes he handled with his treatment of

new year not excepting. A poet of considerable acumen and power, Shahadat Hossain has contributed a few notable poems like 'Ritu Samnyase' and 'Baishakh' in which the violent and destructive as well as the peaceful and constructive have found faithful expression couched in language, powerful and spontaneous, in the tradi-

Jasimuddin does not, however, make sudden appearance on the Bengali literary scene like the Kal Baishakhi as did Nazrul nor does he aim at reformation. He is singular in that his kingdom the canvas of his works extends over the vast rural countryside and the life that drags its existence there. In this kingdom of his he is the unique and indisputable monarch in that he conquered a silent revolution in Bengali poetry in depicting life at its grass-root level with elements from folk life and culture in a way that no one has ever done.

tion of Tagore. Like Shahadat Hossain, Sufia Kamal emulates the Tagorian tradition of construction out of destruction, though they differ in their form and style.

Nazrul has composed only three poems dealing with storm that lashes us in and around the month of Baishakh. The poet himself takes on the impetuosity of the storm and breaks into rebellion against all social ills. He assumes the role of the actor of the great deluge, 'cyclone', 'destruction', 'untimely Baishakhi storm', incarnating

Shiva, the dishevelled god of annihilation. His sudden rebellious appearance in the literary horizon took everyone by storm having personified the Kal Baishakhi himself.

Farrukh Ahmad is another poet, who very successfully conjures up this dual persona of Baishakh. To him it is both a herald a proclaimer of

unabated deluge and a healer of this diseased world. Thus his is a discovery of the constructive forces of nature in Baishakh that scatters destruction in a style that is reminiscent of the robust optimism of one of the greatest romantic poets the world has ever produced P B Shelly of English literature. Farrukh's as well as Rabindranath's Kal Baishakhi (nor-wester) is almost akin to Shelly's west wind which he invokes to

"Drive my dead thoughts over the universe

like withered leaves to quicken a new birth

And by the incantation of this verse

Scatters as from an unextinguished hearth

Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind."

Here Shelley precedes and precurses Farrukh and Rabindranath in that Shelley's belief bred from his optimism holds that the west wind that drives away the withered leaves quickens the growth of the new leaves as has been told earlier. Shelley is robustly optimistic that joy must follow sorrow as spring does winter. As no season is static, so also is the misery of life that must give in to happiness.

"The trumpet of a prophecy. O Wind

If winter comes, can the spring be far behind?"

When storm (the west wind/Kal Baishakhi) visits, it razes down everything with its tremendous speed and turbulent force. So storm symbolises dread and destruction. But that destruction quickens the process of construction.

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