

BAISABI: The biggest festival



Alleneeh sangrai: Young girls and boys sprinkle water on each other in Bandarban.

SHAHIDUL ISLAM

The way tribal people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) celebrate BAISABI is a treat to watch. To mark simultaneously the Chaitra Sankranti and Bangla New Year on April 13 and April 14, the tribals are celebrating their cultural heritage and tradition through this festival from 'time immemorial.'

BAISABI is abbreviated in short from three identical New Year celebration festivals, 'BAI' from 'Baisu' of Tripura, 'SA' from 'Sangrai' of Marma and 'BI' from 'Bijhu' of Chakma tribe respectively.

The word 'BAISABI' resembles 'Baishakh' of ours. Nevertheless, the two words can be juxtaposed to each other for their intrinsic essence of similarity.

Centring 'BAISABI' the three hill districts Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachhari usually come alive and jubilant, and the people caught into a festive fever.

Although, the formality generally ends in those two days, the festive atmosphere and mood of 'BAISABI' hangs on for few more days across the hills.

The first day of 'Baisabi' is called 'Harey Baisu' in Tripura, 'Paingchheye Neeh' in Marma and 'Fool Kishu' in Chakma dialect respectively. One of my friends, Rashed, a photo journalist, does often, especially when 'April' nears insist and provoke me to have a feel of the extra-ordinary way of celebration.

Then he goes on and on, without bothering much to the patience of

the other end, to narrate and eulogise the 'boldness-and-beauty' of BAISABI, the biggest festival of the tribal community.

I cannot help but hear the murmur and smell, the innate fragrance of a traditional festival, one that is an inseparable part of our culture and heritage, completely spellbound. The diligent photographer is so indomitable.

Indeed, Rashed does possess adrenalin when it matters BAISABI! In fact, he hardly misses even slim chances to join the unique festival in April in each calendar. Dressed up smartly in new attire, the tribal boys and girls garners woodflowers to decorate their houses on this day. The elders, on the other hand, are found busy attending guests with special dishes and drinks.

As part of the celebration, the tribal people also arrange wide variety of sports that exclusively herald their novelty.

These include ghila, ladheng, patti, godu and phor games etc. With this, the gengkul dance by Chakma, the deb gairi dance by Tripura and bottle dance by Marma artists add further enchantment to feast the viewers' eyes.

But the catchiest event of the festival is the 'alleneeh sangrai' or the popular and traditional game in which the tribal young boys and girls sprinkle water on each other.

The game is otherwise an informal way of proposing each other to find a prospective life partner.



A tribal girl is performing Tripura dance in Rangamati.

Time for steps to preserve open spaces

ZARINA HOSSAIN

When mankind started to settle down to live in urban centres, the issue of open space was not a topic for discussion. Surrounding the small urban communities were vast expanses of open spaces. Settlements were in close proximity to a natural source of water in its undisturbed and pristine state.

With rise in economic activities through trade, commerce and industry, concentration of people resulted in overcrowding, chaos and extremely poor living conditions. The rich owned magnificent open spaces and lived in luxury but ordinary citizens lived in urban blight. This led urban thinkers to search for alternatives. Provision for and conservation of open spaces gradually came into public focus. It later became an integral part of all urban planning exercise.

Historically, the need for open spaces in cities was recognised in the classic cities as early as the 5th century BC. Later, however, medieval towns became congested and there was little concern for the ordinary city dwellers. Renaissance saw the advent of urban parks and gardens incorporating water bodies. After the industrial revolution ordinary people's life came into focus giving rise to various efforts at making it decent.

Colonial rulers planned open spaces in cities for recreational needs. Cities had low-density areas for security or segregation. Vast open areas surrounded residential quarters and business areas. Racecourses and public maidans were also created. The vast spaces consisting of the maidan, racecourse, Eden Gardens and Fort William in Kolkata, and the racecourse and surrounding Ramna Park in Dhaka are examples. In Chittagong the open space

around the Circuit House is an example. No large parks were created, but the Railway land, in the central areas served the purpose and still acts as the green lungs for the city. The hills in Surson Road, Probertak Pahar serve the need for open spaces. The Polo Ground, and gold course (no longer exists) are examples of playgrounds. Several water bodies had been created to meet the demands for fresh water. The Foy's Lake, created amidst the natural hilly surroundings, the large tank at Agrabad (Debar Par) at Hailshahar, and the twin lakes at Pahartali are fine examples of water bodies built by the Railways during this period.

Affluent landowners excavated many large tanks for themselves and other residents. The Ashker Dighi, the Ranir Dighi, the Dewanji Pukur (filled in the early nineties) are examples.

The Chittagong Development Authority (CDA) prepared the first Master Plan for the city and its environs in 1961. The plan identifies three major problems. "Grave deficiency of open spaces, particularly public parks and small areas suitable for children", was one. It also noted that there were, "too few playing fields." Twenty-six proposals for parks/ other open spaces consisting of 2935 acres (7.5%) of the plan area were made. Together with other open spaces such as protective tree belt, coastal bund, and agricultural reserves, constituted 15.3% of the plan area.

Open areas were of various categories. Some provided a buffer between industry and residential development. Others consisted of riverside parks, central open space, and parks along with water bodies, camping grounds and exhibition parks. Some were connected so as to create a green walkway through the busy areas of the city. Few were

implemented.

Planning standards for open spaces per 1000 population in UK are 10 acres. This consists of 1 acre for parks; 3 acres for school playgrounds, 4 acres for public playgrounds and 2 acres for private playgrounds. This standard has been maintained in many cities but has been considered too lavish for London city, where the minimum standard of 2.5 acres has been achieved. In Singapore the standard is 2.5 acres per 1000 population. The 1961 Plan for Chittagong recommended 2 acres for parks and 2 acres for playgrounds per 1000 population.

There was only about 88 acres of land under this category in 1961. There have not been any significant improvements since. With increase in population the need for more open spaces and playgrounds is great indeed. Considering a population of about 30,00,000 in an area of some 100 sq miles and an open space of say 200 acres, we currently have an open area standard of about 0.06 acres per 1000 population.

In the second statutory plan prepared in 1995, some strategic open areas (special control zones) have been identified. At local and NH (northern hills) levels standards for provision have been recommended.

From above observation and discussion it is apparent that we have failed miserably on two accounts

- To promote the development of parks, playgrounds and other amenity open spaces, and
- To control development along and in the mandatory open spaces and other areas that should have been open along roads, drains, and water bodies.

Though the CDA and Chittagong City Corporation (CCC) are both

entrusted with the responsibility to provide parks/ open spaces, they have been unable to do so due to lack of government support. Designated parks/ open spaces have been routinely rezoned or converted to other uses by the government. Parks are treated with disdain and neglect and are the obvious target of attack for any other use. The precious little provided in planned residential schemes by CDA, CCC or Housing & Settlement have often been re-allocated for other purposes (Agrabad, Hailshahar, Sugandha, Koiballyadham). Private developers sometimes provide marginal spaces. Little concern or guidance/control is exercised by CDA.

Mosques/ mausoleums that once boasted of beautiful surroundings are now cluttered with shops as profit motive reigns supreme (Jame Masjid, Anderkilla). Playgrounds in schools and colleges are a thing of the past.

Absence of open spaces and high plot coverage will lead to severe environmental degradation due to loss of trees and greenery. Large paved surfaces will deprive city areas of the much-needed soft surfaces for water seepage, which will result in flash floods due to excessive loads on the drainage channels. Pollution due to dust, noise and other air-borne emissions will rise causing health problems. Alarm bells are already ringing in Dhaka. With neglect on the part of the government and increase in building activities particularly by developers, Chittagong will not be far behind. If we are to have a future we have to act now.

Zarina Hossain is an architect and town planner, and member of Forum for Planned Chittagong (FPC).

CCC anti-crime project hangs in the balance

NURUL ALAM

The move taken by the Chittagong City Corporation (CCC) to launch an anti-crime project jointly with the police and ansars a year ago seems to have flopped as it is yet to receive the green signal from the higher authorities.

The CCC had already set up sentry boxes at different points in the city for this purpose, but it is likely to abandon the project following indifferent attitude of the authorities concerned, sources said.

The project titled 'Shanti Prokalpa' (peace project) was designed to restore law and order by curbing criminal and anti-social activities.

Initially, the CCC planned to start a pilot project in this regard at Jamal Khan ward near the corporation office and the project proposal was sent to the Home Ministry and other relevant agencies for approval.

As part of the pilot project, the CCC set up 22 sentry boxes at different points at Jamal Khan ward for anti-crime operations and Tk 10 lakh was spent for this.

Some local people, however, are critical of the CCC, saying that CCC should have obtained approval from the Home Ministry before starting the pilot project which involves a huge expenditure.

CCC sources said that the steps were taken at a time when the crime graph was going upward and the

project was expected to receive 'go-ahead' from the government. "But now it seems that the project would never see the light of the day," the sources added.

Mayor of CCC Mohiuddin Chowdhury said, "We have taken up the project to restore law and order in the city and the corporation is supposed to bear the expenditure for its execution."

"We could start the pilot project at Jamal Khan ward if we got the approval of the Home Ministry," he added.

"I think such a project will surely help curb the criminal activities in the city," the mayor said.

According to the plan, each sentry box was supposed to be well-equipped with telephone connection, intercom and walkie-talkie system for better communication with the nearby thana and police camps.

Also, a policeman and an ansar were supposed to be on duty in each sentry box by rotation round-the-clock to keep a vigil, CCC sources said.

In addition, mobile police teams could be engaged to patrol the city streets.

The Chittagong city with a population of over three million has 41 wards under 12 thanas. Six thanas were set up last year to cope with the growing crimes.



A sentry box at Jamal Khan in the city.

Traffic jam and its remedies

ABDULLAH AL MAHMUD

Compared to the Dhaka city, the port city of Chittagong may duly be regarded as a 'paradise' as far as the traffic and road-network are concerned.

But non-implementation of a very few road and bridge projects thwarts the development of a well-laid road network in the city. Construction of these roads and bridges with an investment that is very negligible compared to utility and output, can open up a new era of expansion and growth of the city.

According to the knowledgeable circles, implementation of these projects is very much possible within the resources if they are done in accordance with the planning process and on the basis of priority considering economic viability.

In this regard experts stressed the need for co-ordination among the authorities concerned in absence of which some projects are likely to prove 'ambitious' or 'a luxury' while some earmarked vital projects remain unimplemented for years.

Co-ordination is a must also for traffic management as the movement of traffic in a most undisciplined fashion and haphazardly parking of vehicles baffle the purposes of widening and expansion of the city roads involving huge money.

Both the original master plan of 1961 and Chittagong Metropolitan Master Plan (CMMP '95) of Chittagong Development Authority (CDA) proposed construction of a ring road along the river Karnaphuli from Sadarghat point to the Karnaphuli bridge point.

In the latest master plan (CMMP '95) the road was proposed to be constructed on some 6 kms involving an approximate cost of Tk. 60 crore in three years. But fate of the project remains uncertain to this day.

Engineer Subhas Chandra Barua who was involved in the road-network plan for CMMP'95 told this correspondent that the road could have enabled all the long-distance transports such as trucks from the traditional business centres of Khatunganj and Chaktai and buses from Cox's Bazar, Bandarban and south Chittagong run through Chittagong avoiding the busy streets of the city.

"This could not only help ensure smooth traffic movement but also save time and money. Besides, the roads running through different disorderly developed areas could help a planned growth of the city," Barua said.

Much of the land earmarked for the proposed ring-road is owned by Chittagong Port Authority while the rest remains under illegal occupation at present.

Experts said the construction of the road can be undertaken in collaboration with CPA as the road could also help stop illegal encroachment of CPA land along bank of the river Karnaphuli as well as river-training.

Construction of such a road along the river would help develop growth of centres with sufficient trade transaction facilities and boost peripheral activities there, hoped the knowledgeable circles concerned.

Minister for Commerce Amir Khasru Mahmood Chowdhury and Chittagong City Mayor ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury are also of the same opinion.

ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury while talking of his dream about the city in an interview with The Daily Star recently said, "We have ideas to build a marine drive highway stretching from Faujderhat to Kalurghat along the bay and the Karnaphuli river. It would facilitate communication with the villages on the outskirts of the city to generate huge economic activities in the port city."

The Commerce Minister Amir Khasru in a meeting at the local press club here recently came up with the same observation: "We have plan for a paved embankment from Potenga to Faujderhat and a marine drive on it. Such a drive is sure to create ample scopes of business transactions and accelerate economic growth. A road along the river would help set up growth centres there and develop residential areas on the bank. Besides, the walkways and open spaces there may provide recreational facilities."

At present a good bridge on the river Karnaphuli is a crying need of the Chittagong people to link the suburbs with the city.

Despite having a well-developed road-network with the impressive

Arakan Sarak (Ctg- Cox's Bazar highway), the road link of south Chittagong, Cox's Bazar and Bandarban with other parts of the country has remained under a century-old condition for around two years due to bad condition of the existing bridges linking the east and west banks of the river Karnaphuli.

The construction of Shah Amanat Bridge (locally known as Karnaphuli bridge) over the river in 1990 brought in a great change in the communication of the huge region shortening both the distance and time required for journey to a significant extent.

But within ten years of its opening the bridge was declared closed for heavy vehicles as its wooden deck developed cracks and became worn out at many places.

At present the Kalurghat road and rail bridge of Bangladesh Railway constructed by British engineers some 150 years back maintain the road link of Chittagong and the southern region.

Millions of people of the southern region are now forced to travel through the dilapidated and worn-out Kalurghat bridge risking their lives and undergoing immense suffering every day.

Alternately, one-way traffic along the bridge has created an unbearable congestion of vehicles on both the ends when the travellers have to wait one to two hours in a long

queue to cross the bridge alone, usually a 30-minute journey.

A glimmer of hope arose that the trouble is nearing an end as the authority concerned has now taken initiative to construct a cable-bridge on the river.

The bridge got ECNEC approval early this year and tender seeking technical and financial offer for the 1000-metre bridge to be completed within three years involving some Tk 500 crore was floated.

But conditions of the tender schedule roused some controversy to slow down the implementation of the construction process of the bridge.

At this stage, the concerned road experts say, a bridge is undoubtedly a vital need to facilitate plying of heavy transports of as many as 17 routes of south Chittagong and installation of industries on the other bank of the Karnaphuli. But before going for a cable-bridge or high cost tunnel, economic and time factors should be considered. As such an alternative way should be found out to tackle the present crisis, they said.

In this connection, they said it is very much possible to make the Shah Amanat bridge operational again after necessary repair.

They suggested taking help and advice of local bridge experts.



Traffic jam at Muradpur intersection in the city.