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TRADITIONS UNBOUND

Pahela Baishakh: Random thoughts

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WHAT can be said on *Pahela Baishakh* that has not been said before? The biggest secular festival in the country is also iconic to the Bengali identity. Thanks to innumerable features, cover stories, interviews, news and more, we are aware of how it all began in the Mughal era and how it made a triumphant return as a sign of resistance to "Pakistanisation" in the '60s.

What does *Pahela Baishakh* mean to everyday people (and for a change, not just "stars")? What memories emerge when one thinks of the day? Personal rituals, family traditions, even resolutions and more...Excerpts from what a few random individuals had to say (real names have not been disclosed):

F, a university student, will not go to Chhayanat's *Barshoboroban* on April 14: "On April 14, 1995, I woke up at crack of dawn, showered and put on a new silk *parjabi* my mother got me. Like other 7-year olds I too was super excited about *Pahela Baishakh*. Actually now that I think of it, kids that age get that giddy about every holiday. My mother wanted to get a head start with cooking. So I, along with my *khala* and two of my cousins took off for Ramna. It was my first time at Ramna on *Pahela Baishakh*. I was literally awed at what I saw: thousands of people trying to get in at the same time through the eastern entrance of Ramna Park. It cannot be considered a queue, it was just utter chaos. My *Khala*, then a medical student, was at her wits end trying to manage three kids in the stampede. After what seemed like 20/30 minutes, I noticed she wasn't holding my hand any more. I freaked out but tried to look for her. After about an hour she found me. My new *parjabi* was torn in places. I just couldn't get into the enjoying mood. When I think of *Pahela Baishakh* that image always resurfaces. I've never been to the celebration at Ramna since 1995."

O, a diplomat living in Beijing, gets quite emotional when talking about *Pahela Baishakh*: "For me the best moment comes



when they all sing *Amar shonar Bangla* after the programme at the *botomul*. Every year it's been invariably the same kind of feeling, something akin to an instinctual reaction. The song, which sounds almost 'banal' at assembly lines on any other day, gets suf-

fused with new light in the morning of *Pahela Baishakh* in the midst of the swirling crowd thrashing around the dais. Whether on stage or standing below, when we come to the last line, *ma tor bodon khani molin holey ami noyon jole bhashi*, I just can't hold

back my tears. All of a sudden I feel this lump in my throat. Every year I make a wish may be this time the face will look a little brighter, like my mother when she rarely smiles at any of our achievements. In these days of political reform, I think I can see those days beckoning at us perhaps in not too distant future."

S, an Indian expatriate working for an NGO in Dhaka, is quite excited at the opportunity to celebrate his first *Pahela Baishakh* here: "I grew up in Kolkata and we've always heard of how *Pahela Baishakh* is celebrated here with much gusto. In Kolkata, *Pahela Baishakh* is a major occasion too but it's more of a personal or family thing. We buy new clothes. Among other traditions are getting blessings from the elders and eating special preparations of fish. In the evening people go to Rabindra Sadan and Nandan Complex to enjoy music -- mostly Tagore and Nazrul songs. Some people go to the Kalighat Temple and offer special prayers. However, we don't start the celebrations early in the morning like it's done here."

M, a Nazrul singer, had performed at Chhayanat's *Barshoboroban* programme (at Ramna *botomul*) in the '70s. She remembers how it used to be: "Back then the arrangement was so informal and it used to be a personal experience for everyone. No make up, no fancy designer-wear or overwhelming hair do... just plain white *sari* with red *paar* and fresh *beli phool*. After the musical programme was over we'd have *luchi torkari* followed by *motichurer laddu*. I remember one particular incident regarding *Pahela Baishakh*. It was in early '80s (can't recall the exact year). Political activists wanted to use the Chhayanat platform at the *Baishakhii* celebration. Sanjida apa (Dr. Sanjida Khatun) boldly refused saying, 'This is not a political assembly.' There was a brief scuffle but Chhayanat managed to withstand the unreasonable demand. There was a message in that resistance: *Baishakhii* celebration is for everyone -- regardless of creed, class and political conviction."

Every mask has a story

Festival at Natmondl



MAHMUDA AFROZ

Prakritojon Projommo -- an organisation dedicated to promote folklore, is holding a two-day Mask Festival at the Natmondl, Dhaka University (DU) premises that started on April 13.

Prior to the festival, a workshop was held with 65 participants (age group of 10-52). Students from the Theatre and Music Department, DU took part in the festival as well as students from other art institutes, schools and colleges.

This is the second time such an initiative was taken by Prakritojon Projommo. "While masks have been a part of our culture for centuries, somehow it has never received much exposure. And hence the younger generation of our country is blissfully unaware of its vibrant

existence. Masks have attained mass popularity in India and Nepal but not in Bangladesh," says Monish, a member of the organisation. "The objective of this festival is to generate interest among the young so they can be acquainted with our traditions," adds another member Rabi.

The festival has attracted many viewers from all over the city. Says 8-year old Zabeel, "All these masks are so fascinating. Though some of them look scary but I'm not scared. I do want to take one home and scare others." Adds his grandfather, noted cultural personality Mamunur Rashid who inaugurated the 2-day festival, "It's great to see the mask festival taking off at a national level. Though it started last year, this year it seems more organised and has attracted more participants and

viewers. This is an excellent way of upholding and promoting our traditions." Artists Tarun Ghosh and Shishir Bhattacharji were also present at the event.

Each of the masks has its own fascinating story. While some of them are mythological character, some are from our folklore, and then there are those that highlight different human emotions.

In the evening there were dance performances by various dance and theatre groups including Prachanat (*Dorir khela*), Bindur Chor (*Shiyali Pandit*), Kaktarua (*Thai*) and Foring (*Shomototer Deb Shishura*). The last day of the festival will be held at Lalmatia Girls High School with Professor Abdullah Abu Sayeed as the chief guest.

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