



## Pahela Baishakh: Embodying *Bangla* Culture

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**P**ahela Baishakh is a cultural expression of the Bangalis. It is by no means the only embodiment of a people captivated by its cultural heritage, but it is certainly one of the more prominent and colourful ones. Culture, as a scholar has observed, "is an abstraction from behaviour.... Culture is the name given to a class of things and events dependent upon symbolizing that are considered in a kind of extra-human context." The average Bangali's exuberance of emotion and propensity for engaging in rituals find a perfect outlet in celebrating Pahela Baishakh. Culture is made up of all or any combination of the following elements: beliefs, language, customs, ideas, symbols, institutions, rituals, work of art, ceremonies, and so on. Pahela Baishakh is at once a tradition, symbol, ritual, ceremony, and an institution. But it is more than a sum of all those. It is an occasion for the nation to come together as a unit bound by a shared experience of a very special occasion exclusive to the Bangalis.

In one scholar's profound assessment, culture is stronger than life; it is also stronger than death. A person's attitudes, values, ideals and beliefs are powerfully affected by the culture enveloping him/her. It would stand to reason, then, that a unifying cultural phenomenon like Pahela Baishakh should influence national unity far more than the day of its celebration. That it has not, of course, is not its fault. That responsibility, or irresponsibility, lies squarely on powerful disruptive forces that have been let loose by those Bangalis out to, first, gain, and then, consolidate their hold over political power. If Pahela Baishakh acts as a centripetal force for the nation for that one day, it is submerged by a deluge of centrifugal forces for the greater portion of the rest of the year. And that is a tragedy for the nation itself. Maybe the mammoth crowd that transforms the outdoors into a sea of humanity each Pahela Baishakh over the last ten years or so is sending a subliminal message that it would like to carry over the unifying trend of that day to the rest of the year, without the specter of virulent political partisanship and intolerance acting as Mary's contrary lamb, in an effort to achieve national unity, where agreeing to disagree is the

norm, quashing dissenting views is not.

It goes without saying that the disease called political polarization along entrenched fault lines is not solely the outcome of the political leadership. Their followers, meaning many of the same people who throng the streets on the day, and attend the festivities are also culpable, but the leaders, because of their

room to maneuver around in settling political differences in a decent manner. Such diversity of viewpoints is the bedrock of new ideas, ideas that often drive civilization forward, and it is vital for representative democracy to flourish as a polity.

Culture itself is not a stagnant phenomenon per se. Some aspects of it modify over time, others evolve, and a few

civilization is not identical with our civilization, and the building and rebuilding of states and cultures, now or at any time, is more becoming to our nature than longings and lamentations."

But still we long and lament -- fore those days when Pahela Baishakh formed a part of a continuum of remembrances and celebrations, like Ekushey February, Independence Day, Victory Day, et al, where national unity was not at stake. Sadly, the rot started quite early, in fact, a few short years after Bangladesh became a sovereign, independent nation-state, and it has slowly, but surely, been spreading deeper and wider. Here, it seems to be reflecting Samuel P. Huntington's observation that culture follows power (*The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*). And the powers in control of government would make culture follow their ideology and, inevitably, dictate. And, where culture is made the personal preserve of a political party in power, its capacity as a unifying symbol is drastically weakened. And nation-states' behaviour, to go along with Huntington, is shaped as much by cultural preferences, commonalities and differences as by the pursuit of power and wealth. In other words, the state of a nation's well-being is determined in no small measure by the state of its culture. The more vibrant, healthy, and unifying force its culture is, the nation is that much better off, at least as a unit. And a nation divided is a weak nation.

There is no gainsaying that the state of Bangladesh's culture, in terms of its various manifestations, is uneven in quality. We often wallow in abject mediocrity in some of its key sectors, where we make that state as the standard to aspire to. At the risk of sounding elitist, I would still say that catering to the lowest common denominator has brought about an alarming decline in the standard and good taste in some sectors, especially in the audio-visual field. Granted, they require overhauling, but a portion of the blame for that decline has to be borne by that very political schism that has been vitiating the cultural field for some now. Nonetheless, Pahela Baishakh, or, more appropriately, its celebration, remains as vibrant as ever, and has added, subtly but indubitably, colourful elements as well as innovations to the proceedings.

This write-up began as a

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high position, motivation, and policymaking authority, have to take the lion's share of the blame. The reality of the political process is that the leaders lead, the followers follow. Very rarely does the counter phenomenon occur: where the masses lead, and the leaders are compelled to follow. Abraham Lincoln's characterization of the democratic process is noble and splendid on principle, but hardly conforms to reality in application. Representative democracy is compromised by big money and media spin in being an instrument by the people, and by narrow political interests of the party leadership in being an effective platform for the people. But the sobering reality of the functioning of representative democracy should not be an excuse in creating national schism. There is plenty of

die out. That sage on culture, Jacques Barzun, has offered these priceless thoughts on the timelessness as well as the imperative of culture to mutate and evolve: "Are we seeing the breakdown of our civilization? Sooner or later, the sophisticated person who reads or hears such discussions reminds himself that to the living 'the times' always seem bad; in most areas many voices cry out against the visible decadence; in every generation -- especially the aging -- the world has always been going to the dogs.... But sophistication -- and skepticism -- should perhaps go a step further and ask why that same phenomenon recurs; in other words, the historical-minded should look into the meaning and cause of the undying conviction of decadence.... The very notion of change...implies the notion of loss.... Man's



panegyric to a unifying cultural element, but has turned into a diatribe against a disunifying phenomenon that has been vitiating the cultural field for some now. Nonetheless, Pahela Baishakh, or, more appropriately, its celebration, remains as vibrant as ever, and has added, subtly but indubitably, colourful elements as well as innovations to the proceedings.

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## SHUBHO NABABARSHA From a different perspective

ZANNATULLAMEA

**A**nd yet we are again at the commencement of a new year, with package of celebrations tied with ribbons of our culture. The best thing about Pahela Baishakh to me are the colours! This is the most lively event of the year, marked with vibrant colors and aroma of festivity flying all around. More or less, all the festivals we have are religious/ethnic; celebration of Bangla Noboborsho is the single most popular event that is unilaterally celebrated by one to all - irrespective of class, caste or religion. The celebrations illuminate with and reflect the glory of our nationality, our root, our very own culture.

Apart from the common celebrations that take place in Dhaka, Pahela Baishakh is actually pronounced and celebrated

on a wider scale in the rural parts of the country. "Noboborsho" is what they eagerly wait for, be it for the fairs, be it for the nagordola rides, be it the hope of earning a little bit more by selling their handicraft - whatever it is, undoubtedly it keeps them on their toes for the celebration to begin.

However, in Old Dhaka, the celebrations are no less, apart from celebrating in traditional way, they integrate some different trends and rituals. In some parts of Old Dhaka, kite festivals are held to mark the new year. The localities of Old Dhaka are mostly very festive with people having fun to their fullest extent with their families and friends. They would start their day with panta-bhat, hilsha fish and red chillies, usually all the family members gather at the ancestral home to celebrate with all. Small fairs are held at most localities with nagordola rides, handicraft

products, fuchka chotpoti, muri-muri, bamboo products, hand-made toys for children and lot other products bearing the testimony of our cultural artwork. In the evening, everyone clad in red and white are found heading towards fairs in small groups. The traders and shop-keepers of Old Dhaka still maintain the tradition of "Haalkhata." They open a new register book to keep record of their transactions, clear off all dues and debts and invite their clients and customers to promote goodwill.

Bangladesh is a multi-ethnic country, we have many rituals and festivals throughout the year. Although most of our people live at level with the poverty line and beyond it, our spirit of festivity is still high. A celebration is all about happiness, all about having fun with our near and dear ones, however, the intensity of happiness becomes low when we see some

unfortunate ones fighting for livelihood right before our eyes.

On April 7, 2008, The Daily Star published a picture on the front page, the picture was taken by Shafiq Alam, with the caption "Six-year-old Tania found heading towards fairs in small groups. The traders and shop-keepers of Old Dhaka still maintain the tradition of 'Haalkhata.' They open a new register book to keep record of their transactions, clear off all dues and debts and invite their clients and customers to promote goodwill." The picture says it all, does it not? I am sure it rang a bell in all who saw it. On my part, I would end the article by wishing a Shubho Noboborsho - to all those people who work hard from dawn to after dark to make their both ends meet, to whom "Festival" means a day when they get sufficient amount of food. Let us hope the new year gives them a new beginning-with new opportunities of leading a life where they can at-least afford having staple food thrice a day...