



# Those black and white *Baishakh* days

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**B**AISHAKH is a reminder of the good days that have flown. It is a recapitulation of the clouds that have passed into time. It speaks to you of the warmth you experienced in the embrace of your mother. It tells you of the thrill there used to be as you accompanied your beautiful aunt on her evening stroll through the woods where those monstrosities of urban buildings stand today. Every Baishakh used to be a season of festivities, a time when you celebrated life. For many of us, Baishakh comes in all the splendour of childhood innocence.

Long ago, in our villages, Baishakh was a matter of the heart, carried to its musical conclusion by the soul. When Pahela Baishakh dawned in our little villages, we woke to the chirpings of the birds and the song of the breeze as it rustled through the palm fronds lining the pond. There were the ripples, coming one after the other, in the pond, until suddenly the dip of your feet in the water led to a commotion. Where the ripples had until then been a soft play of melody in the gathering sunrise, that commotion created by your dipping feet quickly gave it the quality of good, healthy cheer. You went into the water, and stayed there, until your father came and induced you out of it. It was Pahela Baishakh, said he, it was time to be in the pond, to be in and with other things besides.

In these materialistic times of the early twenty first century, with all the banality outside your window, you tend to sit back and reflect on an era that is forever gone. Call it the black-and-white era. Baishakh in the old days was a clear delineation between black and white, between light and shadow. Not that black was evil, or that shadow was sinister. It was simply that life came, and was enjoyed, in a fine balance of experience. Our mothers, all young and all so beautiful in those days, were thrilled to bits by the advent of Baishakh. They added to that beauty when they raised their hair

to the heights of the romantic. They wore their hair in a bun. In our parlance, it is known as the *khonpa*. Go back to all those black-and-white photographs of the 1950s and 1960s and you will know. Notice too the *rojonigondha* on that *khonpa*, and you will then have cause to recall how feminine beauty once came in grace that was as natural as it was eloquent. They sang Kanon Devi's songs; and they loved Shondhya Mukherjee.

On Pahela Baishakh, then, your mother and mine tapped nature, partook of its charms and used them to enhance their own appeal. There were the values, that sure sense of self-esteem that came with such an act. Profligacy was nowhere to be seen; and nothing of the seductive was there. All you could see was the alluring. And our grandmothers? Baishakh for them was an excuse to plunge into the cheering business of preparing a variety of pithas. Age had already begun to make them infirm; and many of their responsibilities had already been passed on to their daughters and their daughters-in-law. And yet when it came to a preservation of tradition, to a commemoration of heritage, no one could do the job better than our grandmothers. They stoked the fire in the thatched kitchen even as their grandchildren ran riot in all the cheerfulness they could muster. Their husbands, our grandfathers, all bearded and therefore all sage-like, chuckled in toothless happiness. It was Pahela Baishakh, a happy day, a time that promised a journey back to the past. These old men, patriarchs of their families, waited as the home fires burned. The smell of *khichuri*, that unmistakable crackling sound of the wood as it burned in the mud stove, promised delights yet unknown.

And then there was the village beyond the courtyard. Your neighbour the peasant, as ever in penury, nevertheless looked happy on that bright Baishakh morning. He had reason to. Ever since the

emperor Akbar devised the system where the *haalkhata* could be placed in an annual spotlight, this peasant, like all other peasants, had had a special relationship with Baishakh. It was the season that held out promises for the year ahead. It spoke of fresh new crops. It retold the old story of how the sun had set upon a year, to rise on another.

In the old days, Baishakh was a time when the coming of storms heralded a new celebration of human experience. There was something pristine about those storms, for they connected present with past. Your ancestors had walked home through such storms, men and women who now lay buried in graves that gave you ideas of the graves your generation would one day inherit. Baishakh made you fearful; and yet it made you surmount fear, tell yourself that the rain and the storm were at the core of Creation. And because they were, you were at the heart of Creation as well. Indeed, Baishakh in our childhood was an image of the metaphysical. It shook up the heavens; it threatened to uproot the belligerent trees in that little forest beyond your fields of rice; and it made you acutely aware of your loneliness in time and space.

And then came another Baishakh. The little girl, the neighbour you had always thought was a mermaid as she playfully waded through the rain-filled rice fields in the monsoon, was no more a mermaid. She had turned into the classic beauty you always dreamed of serenading in the light of the moon someday. On that Baishakh dawn, you cupped her cheeks in your hands even as she closed her eyes in profound shyness, blushing to the roots of her hair as she did so.

This year, on Pahela Baishakh, you remember how you have loved, consistently, her moments of glad grace. She ages, in all the fire and fury of beauty. She is not yours. And yet she is part of you, will always be.

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## Pahela Baishakh and our we-ness

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**I** had a sweetly amusing experience recently while listening to an FM radio station on my way back home. A caller, probably a boy in his late teenage, was narrating how excitedly he was awaiting the coming of 14 April, i.e. the Pahela Baishakh. The reason was, this would be the first ever Pahela Baishakh celebration in Bangladesh as he had been born and brought up in a foreign land. I was touched by the passionate fervour of his voice that was more like the ecstatic impatience of a lover waiting for his beloved.

Stuck in the who-knows-when-it-ends traffic jam at Bijoy Sarani, I continued with my thoughts on this issue. This boy definitely had heard about Pahela Baishakh from his parents, even might have read news and seen pictures on the web, and had nourished a kind of overwhelming sensitivity deep inside his heart to observe this day in his motherland. He probably has made several online friends through Facebook or so who may have added further momentum to his spirit by sending him photographs and information on this occasion. And now that he is in Bangladesh, he is desperate to fulfill his long-nurtured curiosity and dream.

Here is where I started to feel good. This boy, despite his grooming in an alien society, eventually didn't shake off the culture he

inherited in his blood. He feels proud to embrace his belongingness to the Bangali culture, and thereby activate his "I"-ness within. His presence in the coming daylong program would at least help him discover the answer to this quintessential query: Who am I?

### Today's Pahela Baishakh and youngsters

One of my intimate associates and a prolific sociologist Dr. Buddha Dev Biswas said, 'To put it simple, Pahela Baishakh, along with its entire festivity, has rejuvenated itself as the one and only secular identity of our nationhood. It has become the *de facto* icon of our emotion-clad nationality which has so far prohibited major socio-political evils. Pahela Baishakh is a manifestation of what we want to be in our genuine selves; humans devoid of hypocrisy and duplicity (which in reality is still a dream).'

Looking back to the Baishakhi celebrations during my school days, I discover the qualitative changes that have occurred over the decades. Lots of innovative items and features have been added with wider flexibilities. Though it became our national festival after 1972, people hardly had any options other than Ramna Botomul and Bangla Academy. Now, almost all corners of the city are full of razzmatazz from fabric stores to restaurants, parks to lakes.

The biggest development, as I would call it, has been the overriding presence and participation of younger generation whom seniors occasionally deem as 'unpatriotic rogues'. Having no dearth of energy to immerse themselves in the Baishakhi fête, these boys and girls make Pahela Baishakh the day of our most dominant secular identity. Fundamentalists may overpower the seniors, but never these youngsters.

Remember Pakistani colonizers' oppressions and attempts to destroy Bangali culture in the 50's and 60's, and subsequently the resistance by the youngsters of that time?

Today's Pahela Baishakh therefore reminds us time and again: Bangladesh is not destined to perish.

However, one must also take into account the odds that sometimes happen on this day in the name of Bangali culture. Why are these

urban posh young people so crazy about *panta bhaat*? When and where has *panta bhaat* been our national food? What about the metal concerts accompanied by opium parties? What about girls falling prey to eve-teasing in *Baishakhi melas*? I dislike mentioning these, but Pahela Baishakh would become thousand time glorious without unruliness of these sorts.

### Bangali-ism and our we-ness

Admittedly, the reason behind Pahela Baishakh's becoming a nationalistic secular occasion lies in its deep foundation inside the traditional Bangali social psyche. This has automatically propagated the ideology of Bangali nationhood (though we haven't attained nation-statehood). As far as history goes, Pahela Baishakh celebrations started from Akbar's reign. It was customary to clear up all dues on the last day of *Chaitra*. On the next day, or the first day of the Bangla New Year, landlords would entertain their tenants with sweets accompanied by organising fairs and other festivities. Soon, the occasion became part of Bangali domestic and social life, and transformed itself into a day of merriment.

The major event of the day was to open a *Halkhata* (new book of accounts). This was wholly a financial affair. In villages, towns and cities, traders and businessmen

closed their old account books and opened new ones. They used to invite their customers to share sweets and renew their business relationship with them. This tradition is still practiced in cities particularly by jewelers.

Interesting is the fact that in rural areas everything on this day is scrubbed and cleaned. People take bath early in the morning and dress in fine clothes to visit relatives, friends and neighbours. Special foods are prepared to entertain guests. This has direct link to our conventional rural hospitality that has later extended to the urban societies. In other words, urbanisation of the middle class has resulted many of our rural etiquettes and programs to manifest in a newer shape, and Pahela Baishakh has positively played a vital part in it.

So, when we watch various agricultural products, traditional handicraft, toys, cosmetics as well as various kinds of food and sweets being sold as principal items in city fairs, puppet shows and merry-go-rounds entertaining the posh kids, and singers-dancers staging jatra, palagan, kobigan, jarigan, gambhira, baul, marfati, murshidi, bhatiali songs mesmerizing the audience, we understand the uncompromising bonding of Bangali-ism and our we-ness flourishing day by day in full swing.

Smothered by self-defined nationalism, Pakistani

colonizers tried to impose their domination on us without realizing that culture, not religion or anything else, works as the permanent core force for unification and self-actualization of a nation. It was the other-ness on their part through which they wanted to wipe out our we-ness, our unified identity of Bangali nationalism. 'Imperialists in all ages had so little brain power!' remarked a smiling Dr. Buddha Dev.

Trust me, Pahela Baishakh every year makes me feel pity for the colonizers.

### Finale

However, the most unfortunate reality as I feel is: we haven't educated ourselves enough to energise our minds with the spirit of our nationhood. I often hum Renaissance band's hit number 'Hey Bangladesh! Tomar boyash holo koto...' which reminds me, we have still miles to go.

When we walk on the crowded streets of Dhaka breathing the moisture-laden air, watching the dusty pavements, nagging beggars at the traffic stops, office-people hastily boarding the buses to return home after day's work, do we at all remember our we-ness that Pahela Baishakh gives us every year? I wish the answer could always be a big YES....

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