



Celebrating Nababarsha

MARZIA RAHMAN

FUN and fiesta, song and sunshine, drum and dancing, crowd and colour, joy and jubilation - all are found in one single day, the day we Bangalis proudly celebrate our 'Pahela Baishakh'. It is celebrated on April 14th. Pahela Baishakh is also known as 'Nobobarsho' or 'Bengali New Year', as it is the first day of the first month of Baishakh in the Bengali calendar. It is the most colourful and joyous festival of the year.

Celebrations of Pahela Baishakh started from Akbar's reign. It was customary to clear up all dues on the last day of Chaitro. On the next day, or the first day of the new year, landlords would entertain their tenants with sweets. The main event of the day was to open a halkhata or new book of accounts. 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 practised by many traders, especially in the small towns.

Every year on 14th April Bangladeshis celebrate the festival of the Bengali New Year. It is a magical day when everything seems perfect. Even nature seems to celebrate with humans with the warm sunlight splashing the air with an abundance of gold. It is a day when people irrespective of their class, religion and age indulge in the merrymaking, dancing with joy and blissfully unaware of the difficulties of life. It is a day when colours

seem brighter, flowers fresher, and the air lighter and faces happier. It just feels like all is well with the world.

It is also the only day of the year when all the Bengali people turn themselves willfully and joyfully into Khati Bangali. People from all walks of life basking in the spirit of Bangalipana wear traditional Bengali attire: young women wear white saris with red borders, and adorn themselves with churi (bangles), phool (flowers), and tip (bindis). Men wear white pajamas or lungi (dhoti/dhuti, long skirt) and kurta (tunic). Many people start the day with the traditional breakfast of panta bhat (rice soaked in water), green chillies, onion, and fried hilsa fish.

It is a sunny, joyful day when the streets turn into a festive corner. Different cultural groups all over the country organise cultural programmes where singing and dancing take place. Baishakhi fairs are arranged in many parts of the country. The most colourful new year's day festival takes place in Dhaka. Large numbers of people gather early in the morning under the banyan tree at Ramna Park where Chhayanat artists open the day with Tagore's famous song, "Esho, he Baishakh, Esho, Esho (Come, O Baishakh, Come, Come)."

A similar ceremony welcoming the new year is also held at the Institute of Fine Arts, University of Dhaka. Students and teachers of the institute bring out a colourful procession and parade round the campus. Newspapers bring out special supplements. There are also special



programmes on radio and television.

Pahela Baishakh is a day dedicated to the celebration of the essence of being

Bangali. Pahela Baishakh bears immense significance in the life of all Bengalis. It is a festival of colours and fun, fun and frolic, which is cele-

brated with unmatched passion and zeal. It is a festival that brings with it a lot of essences. But the one that is above all is that, it brings

with it the promise of life, of new beginnings and of new hopes.

"Come, come O Baishakh
With your hot breath blow

away the dying,
Let the debris of the whole year be driven far away."

The writer is a former teacher.

Thoughts on Pahela Baishakh...

MAHDIN MAHBOOB

If there is any festival that unites all of us Bangalis, it is none other than the Bengali New Year or *Pahela Baishakh* (1st Baishakh). This is a time that enables us to forget all the differences and indulge in celebrating our *Bangaliana*.

The history of the Bengali Calendar or *Bongabdo* goes back over 400 years to the Mughal Era in India when Emperor Akbar in 1584 AD initiated it with the name *Fasli San* (agricultural year). It later came to be known in its current name. In the Mughal Era, the *Hijri* (Islamic) Calendar was followed for collecting agricultural taxes. However, as the Islamic calendar is a Moon calendar, it does not coincide with the harvest and this resulted in farmers being hard-pressed to pay taxes out of season. In order to take care of this problem, the Mughal Emperor ordered a reform of the calendar and accordingly, *Fatehullah Shirazi*, a renowned scholar and astronomer, formulated the *Bangla year* (*Bongabdo*) on the basis of the lunar *Hijri* and *Banglasolar* calendars.

The first day of the Bengali Calendar, is not only a time for jubilation and celebration, it also is a huge financial affair in the form of opening new *halkhatas* or new book of accounts. In villages, towns and cities, traders and businessmen close their old

account books on this day and open new ones. They invite their customers to share sweets and renew their business relationship with them. This tradition is still practiced in different parts of the country, especially by jewelers. In Dhaka, this tradition still continues to thrive in the different business organizations based in Old Dhaka.

The historical importance of the celebration of the

The first day of the Bengali Calendar, is not only a time for jubilation and celebration, it also is a huge financial affair in the form of opening new halkhatas or new book of accounts.

Bengali New Year in Bangladesh may be dated from the observance of the day by *Chhayanat* in 1965. In an attempt to suppress Bengali culture, the Pakistan Government had banned songs written by *Rabindranath Tagore*, the most famous poet and writer in Bengali literature. Protesting this move, *Chhayanat* opened their *Pahela Baishakh* celebration at Ramna Park (*Ramna Botomul*) with Tagore's song welcoming the month. The day continued to be

celebrated in East Pakistan as a symbol of Bengali culture. After we gained independence in 1971, it soon became a national festival, a symbol of the Bangladesh nationalist movement and an integral part of the people's cultural heritage. Later, in mid 1980s the Institute of Fine Arts of Dhaka University added colour to the day by initiating the *Boishakhi* parade, much like a carnival parade. Today, the cultural function and

Baishakhi Fair at Ramna Botomul and the parade organized by the Institute of Fine Arts has become an integral part of the Baishakhi celebrations.

Since *Pahela Baishakh* is a public holiday, everyone gets the opportunity to celebrate it to the maximum. Starting from the musical soiree early in the morning at *Ramna Botomul* to the different *Baishakhi Melas* arranged all over the city, Dhaka, like all other cities in Bangladesh, becomes a celebration point of life. Men are seen to be clad

in white kurtas while women grace themselves with the quintessential '*shada sharee with tal par*'. The *panta-ilish* along with different other Bangali delicacies including a range of *bhortas* and *pithas* are on the must-have list on this day. Whether you roam around the whole day, or take a break and chill at home with friends and family over a glass of *Tetuler Shorbot* is totally up to you but the fact that everyone becomes a true Bangali on this day is undeniable.

But were we meant to be Bangalis for one single day every year? Is this why a countless number of men and women sacrificed their lives in our Liberation War in 1971? I hate to say this, but today, most of us are becoming what can be appropriately termed as 'One-Day-Bangalis'.

Due to modernization and so-called westernization, our generation has the tendency to forget most of the Bangali culture that we were once proud of one day. A major part of every culture is its culinary delights and our culture is rich in its own array of different sorts of delicacies. *Pitha*, *Kheer* and other sweets, made out of *patali gur* and *khejurer gur* used to be a commonly available delicacy in different households of this region not a long time back. But today, it would be really difficult to find these delicacies when you go to someone's house. Even if you do, it is very unlikely that it will be homemade. There is a

lot of question on the quality of *Pithas* and sweets bought from different shops (especially after we got to see on TV the 'extremely hygienic' conditions in different shops in the mobile court missions). But people would find it 'unsmart' to present homemade *pithas*, they would rather buy these from different shops, many of whose maintenance of hygiene levels while making the food are seriously doubtful.

The history of cake dates back to more than 300 years and it still continues to be baked in almost all the households in the western world. I am not claiming that people do not buy from bakeries, they most certainly do, but they haven't ceased to know how to bake it themselves. On special occasions, a homemade cake is a must no matter how rich or poor you are.

It's true that life has become faster and we cannot afford to spend as much time on cooking as we could have possibly done before. But let's go back to the example of the cake. Question is, if the Western people can still manage time with the help of new technologies (microwave ovens, blenders, mixers, etc.) why can't we? Why have we become too busy to practice our own culture? That surely is a question that remains to be answered!

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