The Tradition of Baishakh

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LET's talk about a festival in Bangladesh where there are no barriers of religion, where people from all religions celebrate the festival with great delight and joy. I know you will say that it must be Pahela Baishak. Yes, you are absolutely right. Pahela Baishak is celebrated in a festive manner not only in Bangladesh but also in West Bengal as well as by Bengali people in Tripura and Assam. Besides, all over the world Bangla speaking people celebrate this day. When it is the question of our culture and our heritage, we unite, we assemble under the same umbrella. Pahela Baishak is that kind of Bengali culture. On this day, we Bengalis gather for new hopes and a new future.

Celebrations of Pahela Baishak started from Akbar's reign. But behind it the main cause was economical. Under the Mughals, agricultural taxes were collected according to the Hijri calendar. As the Hijri calendar is a moon calendar, it does not coincide with the harvest. Consequently, farmers were hard-pressed to pay taxes out of season. In order to streamline tax collection, the Mughal Emperor Akbar ordered a reform of the calendar. Accordingly, Fatehullah Shirazi, a renowned scholar and astronomer, formulated the Bangla year on the basis of the lunar Hijri and Bangla solar calendars. The new Fasli San (agricultural year) was introduced in March 1584, but was dated from Akbar's ascension to the throne in 1556. The New Year subsequently became known as Bangabdo or Bengali year. It was customary to clear up all dues on the last day of Choitro. Then the first day of the New Year, landlords would entertain their tenants with sweets. On this occasion there used to be fairs and other festivities. In due course the occasion became part of domestic and social life, and turned into a day of jollity.

In Bangladesh the celebrations of Pahela Baishak started from a national consciousness. To suppress Bengali culture, Pakistan Government had banned Tagore songs. In 1965, protesting this move, Chayanat started Pahela Baishak celebrations at Ramna Park with Tagore's song welcoming the month. The day continued to be celebrated in East Pakistan as a symbol of upholding Bengali culture. After 1972 it became a national festival. That is why even after the fundamentalists exploded bombs in the Chayanat programme in 2001, people did not stop going to Ramna Batamul.

To the city dwellers, Pahela Baishakh is getting up early in the morning and going to Ramna Batamul dressed up in fine clothes. Young women wear white saris with red border and adorn themselves with bangles and flowers. Young men wear white pajamas (some *dhuti*) and panjabi. Tagore's Boishakh song *Esho he boishakh esho, esho* is heard everywhere.

I have never been to a Pahela Baishakh fair in village but heard from my parents that village fairs on the occasion used to be totally a different picture. For the whole year village people would wait for this. Traders used to come from distant places to attend it. This fair continued for four or five days. Undoubtedly, it was a very big festival and more enjoyable to the villagers than the Eid. Those great *Goliakhola* or *Bot-tola* are not there anymore. Many things have changed with time. Time marches on and it changes the golden moments.

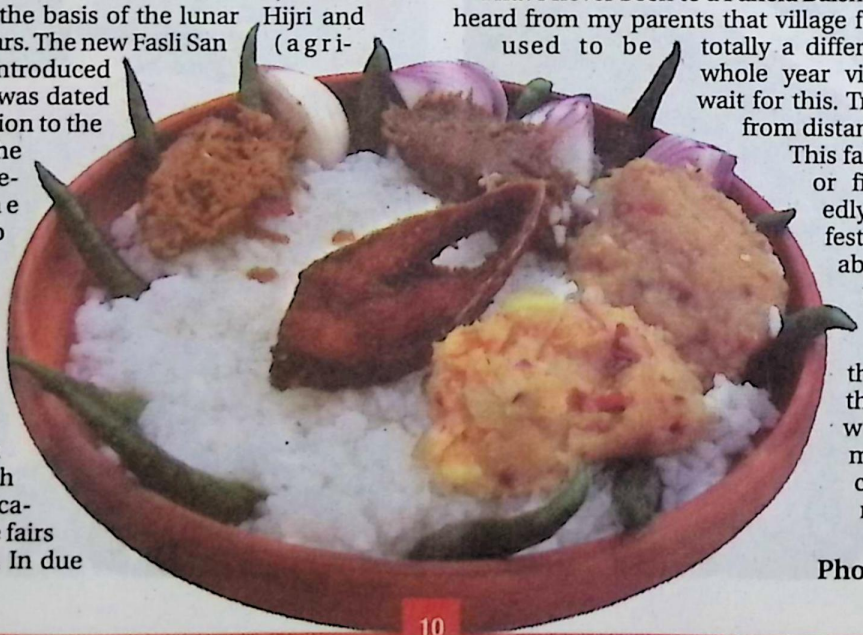


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