



# Culture in global *communication* age

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**P**AHELA Baishakh is at once a cultural phenomenon and an expression of exuberance of emotion that combine to unite the nation-state of Bangladesh, even if for one of those rare days in a Gregorian calendar when the nation presents a united front. Sadly, too many divisive factors all too often present a picture of national disunity, but we will not go into that dismal state of affairs on this day of symbolic rejuvenation, joy and merriment that is the commencement of the Bangla New Year: Pahela Baishakh.

That Bangalis celebrate the advent of their calendar year, and follow it simultaneously with the universal Gregorian calendar is a testament to their proud cultural tradition. Culture, as a scholar pithily states, is "an abstraction from behaviour." It is a means to an end, which, in more of an abstract sense, is the security and continuity of life. It is, in that sense,

taboos, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals, ceremonies, and symbols." Pahela Baishakh is a combination of customs, codes, ceremonies, symbols, institutions and beliefs. The traditional cultural rituals of the day continue to be observed year after year, and are common knowledge to the Bangladeshis. They are there for all to see, savour, and participate in, singly or in groups. And they take part in with great gusto.

Nonetheless, while most of the rituals have been kept intact in their essence and much of their form over the ages, some have taken on new or added significance, others have undergone pronounced or subtle modification, a few have periodically made their debuts, while some have faded away altogether, usually unobtrusively. The changes can be seen and felt in Dhaka

more than in other parts of the country, the modifications coming about mainly due to its

more subtle than in-your-face, more felt than blatant.

That, emphatically, does not signify that the modifications are necessarily deleterious for our culture. A static society is a lifeless society; a static culture is a moribund culture. Civilizations have decayed, not the least because their culture had atrophied. Cultural evolution is integral to human evolution. Some things will inevitably change or vanish altogether for a dynamic society to continue, and for a culture to continue to flourish and be vibrant. Pahela Baishakh will have to undergo periodic modifications, additions and losses in order to continue to appeal to succeeding generations of Bangladeshis. Inevitably, and this is particularly apposite to the average traditional, conservative Bangladeshi (implying the vast majority), there will be skepticism in any particular generation who have been privy to such changes, to whom it all boils down to the world going to the dogs. Jacques Barzun, the noted cultural historian, explains the lament of a generation that has seen the modification of its familiar, and comforting, culture passing before its very eyes: "If... such faiths and forms are considered good by a generation that grew up to value them, that generation will experience at their passing a legitimate feeling of loss." He ends with a message of hope and the imperative of moving on: "Man's civilization is not identical with our civilization, and the building or rebuilding of states and cultures, now or at any time, is more becoming to our nature than longings and lamentations."

There is no hiding from the fact that global communication is having a visible impact on international cultural life. The seemingly endless development of technology and its products have found their way into the cultural life of Bangladesh. Inevitably, it has been having an impact on one prominent manifestation of that culture: Pahela Baishakh. Taking myriad pictures by cell phone of various events of the day and then disseminating them via the Internet to friends and family abroad allow for a far-flung participatory audience who can keep in touch with our (and their, where applicable) culture within a few hours of their having taken place, without physically

being here.

Alongside the traditional songs, a new generation takes recourse to foreign musical influences to belt out tunes that, in their own fashion, extol Pahela Baishakh and all that the day symbolizes. And, novel food fads coexist that day with the customary fare that, not infrequently, is consumed only on that day of the year, as if only to pay homage to it. The list of modifications goes on, some so subtle that one might have to pause for a while to detect them. The fact is, as Majid Tehrani observes, "Through global satellite and computer networks, transborder data flows, scientific and professional electronic mailing and commercial advertising, the macromedia (of communication) are supporting the globalization of national markets, societies, and cultures." In this digital age, it would be futile, not to say foolish, to ignore them or their impact; the prudent act would be to channel them towards aiding our culture into becoming more vibrant, more dynamic, and more germane to the era while guarding against any negative impact on our culture and society. The important thing to remember is that change from long familiarity does not automatically translate into something pernicious.

There can be little equivocation that media imperialism by a very few dominant Western countries (led, by a lengthy margin, by the US) over the rest of the world, especially the developing countries. Even France, Canada, and the European Union have expressed alarm over penetration of their cultures by foreign books, magazines, films, TV programmes, and other cultural products. As Herbert Schiller elucidates, "It has been recognized for some time that familiar cultural products and services --- films, TV programs, books, news records, etc. --- besides offering entertainment, are ideological items embodying social values and messages, and consequently influence the organization of the entire social enterprise."

It is true that some writers warn of overemphasizing Western media influence. Douglas Boyd, for example, believes that critics "either deemphasize or ignore the artistic, production, or financial limitations of many developing countries."

Precisely. And, consequently, developing countries import Western programmes to fill the void of consumers' unfulfilled demands. And, in the process, leave themselves open to Western cultural influence, which generally appeals positively to the audience. In Howard Frederick's assessment, "Western culture seems to exploit essential human values, appeal to basic human emotions, and use universal modes of expression." That is as compelling a mix for creating appeal as any. And the Western media takes full advantage of the situation. Former Philippines first lady Imelda Marcos once graphically captured the power of this appeal: "Like God, advertising and advertisements are everywhere. They literally grow on trees, they light up the sky, they line the streets, they decorate the buildings.... And what more susceptible audiences, more sweetly credulous viewers are there than the mass consumer markets? They lap up every word, devour every picture and comic strip, absorb every musical note, ready to believe every extravagant claim made in advertisements."

This write-up began on the observance of an integral part of our cultural heritage. It deliberately went off into the much wider arena of the impact of global communication on national culture. That impact has been there for some time now, and will continue to expand in scope and intensity. We will not have Marshall McLuhan's "global village" because high politics will ensure that from becoming reality in the foreseeable future, but we have become a part of a skewed global media and communication system. Inevitably, Bangladesh's culture has been affected by it, either positively or negatively, and will continue to be so. As will the tradition of Pahela Baishakh. There is no need to get alarmed, though, as long as its spirit and essence are kept intact. As I believe they will be. Here is looking to the future of the observance of Pahela Baishakh ad infinitum. Shuvo Nobo Borsho.

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Stronger than life, and stronger than death. From a relatively more concrete standpoint, one scholar defines culture as "integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behaviour that is both a result of and integral to the human capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations. Culture thus consists of language, ideas, beliefs, customs,

introduced by the people from other regions, as well as by the influence of global communication. That influence has been unmistakable and pervasive across society and culture. Pahela Baishakh has not been able to escape it, even if that impact has been

sprawling metropolitan character that is fed by the variations and novelties