



The unifying symbol

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PAHELA Baishakh is the symbol of unification for the Bengali population. It is the common thread by means of which people of all strata living in the land called Bangladesh are bundled together. It provides an uncommon spirit which is cherished by everybody, irrespective of caste and creed, colour and tongue, sex and age, passion and occupation. It unites the rich and the poor, the master and the slave, the literate and the illiterate, the healthy and the sick, the blessed and the damned. The unifying spirit is original and undying. It is rooted in the long year-charting tradition of the Bangla-speaking people. It is a unique cultural potency of the Bengali.

As soon as the door is knocked at, the atmosphere is filled with

air, painting the sky with their colour of dream. Poets write new poems, lyricists write new songs and composers attach melody to them, which the singers sing with all their energy in vocal cords. Tender sensations grow up like the sprouting leaves on bough. Mind turns green and vibrant like nature.

People exchange Nabobarsha greetings as the day breaks. Some even start it right from the zero hour at midnight. Greetings fly near and far. It is accomplished with mouth and machine. Technology has made greetings easier. Besides card greetings, SMS greetings with the aid of cell phone are produced aplenty. Wishes for happiness and prosperity do not remain restricted to a particular community only, but it extends across all communities. Wherever the Bengali people, be in Bangladesh or outside, they feel a common identity via the common cultural heritage. The ethnic or religious identity is rendered less important. The Muslims, Hindus, Buddhas, and the Christians - whatever ethnic origin they may have -- all come under the same roof standing on the same piece of rock. Pahela Baishakh is out and out secular in character.

Pahela Baishakh descends on the banks of Padma and Jamuna with all the mystery of the universe. The sun of the day appears to be different as it rises, radiating scintillating ray, in the eastern horizon. The ray dives quick into the wondering eyes, making them restive with awe and admiration, gradually melting into a festive mood. People step out of home and gather here and there. They call all others to come out and make the day most enjoyable. The beat of dhol and the tune of flute show them the way. They sing and dance: "Melai Jairey Melai Jairey." They rush to fair and mingle with the crowd, in array or disarray. Baishakhi Mela gets abuzz with the haggling of buyers and sellers. Various kinds of fancy goods along with foodstuffs like kholi, muri, batasha and nimki etc catch the visitors' vision.

content They chant: "Esho Hey Baishakh Esho Esho. Tapasho Nishwasho Bayey, Mumursherey Dao Urayey. Bachharer Abarjana Dur Hoyey Jak." (Welcome Baishakh! Come and blow away the dying soul with your pure breath. Let the debris of year disappear.) People welcome the first day of Bengali calendar with music and poetry, spraying all their aroma of sentiment in

new look. Children specially frolic in the neighbourhood with new dress-up. They seek blessings of the superiors for a prosperous future. The superiors also lavishly pour all their good wishes on them. Male adults put on panjabi and fatua while women wear sari of special texture and design. White sari with red border is usually their first choice. Girls also adorn themselves with flowers and otherwise, fitting the occasion. Breaking the communal boundaries, people embrace one another and transmit their warmth of heart across. It is an exquisite scene, very rare in other cultures of the world. Hand in hand and shoulder to shoulder, they pledge to go forward in their mutual benefit.

Pahela Baishakh brings heyday for artisans and craftsmen. On the eve of the celebration, they become busy to make assorted artefacts consistent with the taste of the day. New earthen wears are prepared and painted in due hue. Various sorts of handicrafts, with superb designs, hit the market. Baishakhi fashion is specially reflected in men and women's wears. The students of fine arts make colourful objects, which symbolically represent the Bengali life and culture, for the procession of Pahela Baishakh. They call it "Mangal Shobhajatra" meaning 'welfare parade'. With the marching of people from all walks of life, the message of peace and harmony is floated around, to the living generations and the posterity.

Pahela Baishakh brings people closer when they shun all their narrowness in demeanour. They become amiable and go for amicable solution of their day-to-day hitching. They bury the hatchet and even embrace the enemies. They know it is an opportunity for consolidating relationship. Friends meet friends and relatives meet relatives. It upholds social understanding and unity. Every village, every street, every bazaar turns into a bustling rendezvous. People engage themselves in the pleasure of meeting, without any worry of separation. They share the delight of association. They take care that nobody is gloomy in this special day. May all be merry and happy -- that is Bakshakhi mantra. The waves of joy flow in all directions. Nobody is deprived of its majestic touch.

Young minds get soaked in romantic feelings in the day. They throng the thoroughfares and parks to open their heart wide. They become isolated in crowd, They talk without cessation to increase the noise of celebration. They go to riverside or lakeside and discover

themselves in the dim watery reflection. They let loose their imagination and hover in heaven in accompaniment of clouds. Their eyes glisten with the dew of emotion and the glee flashes through their body and soul. They become elated to recite: "Aji e prabhatey rabir kar, kemoney pashilo praner par, kemoney pashilo guhar adharey prabhat pakhir gan, na jani kenorey etodin parey jagia uthilo pran....Jagia uthechhey pran ore y utholi uthechhey bari, ore praner bashona praner abeg rudhia rakhitey nari." (At this dawn how could the ray of sun reach the soul, how could the song of morning birds reach the gloom of cave, I don't know why life sprang up after so many days....When life is up with the tumult of water, the desire and emotion of heart cannot be resisted.)

People in Bangladesh prepare all delicious foods on the occasion of Pahela Baishakh. They arrange dish to the best of their capacity. It is a common belief of the denizens of this deltaic geography that a modest menu in Pahela Baishakh will ensure them so throughout the year. Therefore they buy big fishes and cook rich foods at home for themselves and for guests. And everybody is a potential guest. Nobody is denied hospitality in this day. The hosts consider it a blessing that they entertain others. They derive great pleasure in 'atithi appayan'. Anybody may drop in any dwelling; there is no barrier. This is an immaculate residue of pristine Bengali culture.

Pahela Baishakh brings life to urban and rural culture alike, though the mode of celebration is a little different in two domains. The city celebrations air more pomp and colour. It excels in sophistication of arrangement. Here more money is spent for organising functions and fairs. Village celebrations, apparently a bit lacklustre, are however no less vivacious. In fact, rural space is the blood stream of the particular cultural saga of Baishakh. City people might take panta rice with a piece of hilsha as breakfast rather as a fashion while panta (often taken with green chilli) is a regular dish for village people. Pahela Baishakh celebration entails a little artificiality in city, so to say. But there is no lack of cheerfulness anywhere. The city has concert while the village has bayati ashore. They city has electronic musical instruments while the village has ektara, dotara or behala. The city has the orgy of wild ball while the village has Manipuri and traditional folk dance.

Hal-khata is one of the important features of Pahela Baishakh. The business people open their new book of account, offering sweetmeat to their customers. Whoever approaches the shopkeepers, they are given jilapi or amriti as a token of good will. The businessmen shun all their petty business interest and become generous for the day. Just one day before, they closed the old account. They kept aside the old affair of debit and credit. They are now fresh and smiling. They try to convey the message -- 'We care for each other.' The practice is found in small traders as well as big shopping malls. The southern breeze infuses the vastness of Bay in the mind of business people, who are characteristically accustomed to counting money.

It is unfortunate for Bangladesh, founded on secular politically ideology, that it has witnessed the rise and spread of religious fundamentalism and terrorism in recent years. Religious fanaticism is all against the secular Bengali spirit. The fanatics are out there to destabilise the country by destroying the harmony among the religious communities. So they attacked the Pahela Baishakh celebration at Ramna Batomul. In fact all secular symbols of the Bengali are their target. So they launched attack on Baul sculpture, Udichi function and movie houses. They undermined the secular legal systems killing judges. They exploded bombs to create panic among general public. It is an ominous sign. All peace-loving people must be cautious of the hatred-mongering outfits. Being imbued with the spirit of Nabobarsha, they must resist the sinister force.

The power of Pahela Baishakh is magical. Good-hearted people here may gather vigour from the long-cherished culture and build up a harmonious society for them. No evil force can succeed in denting the undaunted spirit, the spirit that we uphold in our thought and action -- that inspires us to remain united getting over all communal feelings. The spirit will flow from heart to heart, from generation to generation, to invigorate the ideal of secularity and humanity. The Bengali will always boast of the unifying symbol, which is bestowed on them by the rites of rich cultural tradition.

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