



Our cultural heritage

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FOLLOWING the Bangla calendar, when the Pahela Baisakh comes and we step into a new year, we try to search our souls with a view to rediscovering our cultural heritage originating from this deltaic land mingled with the Bengali ethnicity. On this day, most of the Bengalis, especially those from the middle class, are engrossed in nostalgic feelings, appreciating the glorious past of our nationhood.

Indeed, once upon a time we had the colourful cultural spectrum. A groove-based village society of the land had the multi-

dimensional cultural aspects. Literally we observed, 'Baro masee tero parbon' (thirteen festivals in twelve months) based on various features of six seasons, religious festivity and other social issues. In secular manner once all Bengalis celebrated many festivals like Nabanna, Poush Mela, Chaitra Sankranti, Eid, Moharam, Durga Puja, Kali Puja and so on. Among these festivals, many were purely secular (e.g. Nabanna, Poush Mela) and some were religious. However, many of pure secular festivals like Nababna, Poush Mela, have been sent to the museum at the point of history when most of the solvent middle class people were urbanised keeping behind their past peasant roots in remote villages.

In the past, the boundary between religious communities was blurred, especially in festivals. Hindus invited their fellow Muslim friends in their Puja; conversely Hindus also participated as guests in the Muslim's events and at that time there was no social taboo as we sometimes observe in our 'modern' time. In those days, Islam of the land did not raise any question whether that particular festival originated from Hindu religion and whether Muslims should be debarred from participation. The reason behind this lay in the way of preaching Islam which began in around the 14th century

in this region. Most of the people who were converted into Islam in the erstwhile East Bengal were from the lower strata of the Hindu community and they were inspired by the 'Peers' / 'Awalias' who followed the Sufism, contrary to the orthodox view of the Islam. This Sufism stressed on a spiritual union with God and did not require its newest adherents to abandon their traditional beliefs and practice totally. So, the influence of the indigenous Bengali cultural practices is predominantly evident among the Muslim community in this region. For this, the majority of the Bengali Muslim maintained liberal outlook and traditionally believe in the principle of peaceful coexistence with other religious communities.

Though over the time, we have lost some of our traditional festival days, still we can be proud of our addition of Ekushey as a very special day which grew out of love for our mother tongue Bangla. Language is the most powerful instrument for smooth propagation of cultural heritages from generation to generation. Bangla language has reached such a position that we can confidently assert that this is one of the richest languages of the globe. Bengalis from both Bangladesh and India have enriched Bangla to that extent that we are about to establish Bangla in all

aspects of our life, starting from education to other private and public domains. Despite this assertion, if we assess the use of Bangla in our everyday lives, a frustrating scenario will definitely be surfaced.

At present, in day-to-day conversation, in general, many youngsters are using mangled Bangla infused with large scale English and Hindi vocabularies. The advertisement of various cellular phone companies capture the language of the urban middle-class youth which is mixed up with English, Hindi vocabularies to a large extent in Bengali dialect in order to appear smart and cool. This new Creole has a greater impact on the everyday conversation of this generation. Even the electronic media, especially private FM band radio stations and some private TV channels, are promoting this sub culture of language practice in their different programs.

In academic domain too, we are promoting English, as all pervasive globalization dictates us to do so, otherwise we will stay behind in the present competitive world in all aspects. In fact, we wrongly perceive globalization as one way traffic and consequently we have become only the receiving end. But if we ignite our mind with patriotism, definitely we will be able to contribute much to our own

language Bangla to the process of globalization. In fact, if we compare Bangla with other modern languages then it can be ascertained that it has all properties to be a global media for communications. Still we collectively have failed to promote Bangla globally and resist the aggression of neo-colonial linguistic practice.

If we really want to portray ourselves as a nation, with self esteem we must uphold the inherent essence of Bengali nationalism --- secularism and Bangla language. We have a long way to go. Mich'el Billig, a contemporary sociologist of the UK, in his book entitled 'Banal Nationalism' has suggested that if a nation wants to uphold its cultural aspects and heritage in the psyche of its people, continuous flagging of the cultural aspects of that nation is a must. This assertion connotes the popular Bengali songs, 'Ek tara bazaio na/ Dui tara bazaio na/ Ek tara bazaile mone poira jai/ ek din Bangali chhilam re' (Don't play ektara/Don't play guitar/The tunes of ektara reminds me/One time I was Bengali). So, if we want to instil our cultural heritage and traditions into the mindset of the people, we need to practise our cultural ethos in our everyday life.

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From Agra to London!

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PAHELA Baishakh originated in the Sixteenth Century under Akbar the Great. The objective was to remove uncertainties and inconveniences related to tax payments. The astronomer, Fatehullah Shirazi developed the Bangla calendar that was based on the existing Hijri (lunar) and Hindu (solar) calendars. Pahela Baishakh is celebrated as New Year's Day of the Bangla calendar in Bengali communities throughout the world.

Since the birth of the Bangla calendar was related to tax payments, a tendency started to clear all debts on New Year's Eve. This is the last day of the Month of Chaitra. This day soon came to be known as the Chaitra Sangkranti. After paying all debts people would clean their slates and start afresh with Halkhatas. Distribution of sweets was one of the first cultural expressions of Pahela Baishakh.

Whatever the reason behind the creation of a calendar, the celebration of a New Year in all cultures soon becomes festivity and makes its way into the culture. Very soon Pahela Baishakh gained popularity through annual fairs in rural Bengal. Fairs from the middle ages in all cultures have served a dual purpose. First, fairs would have an element of commercialisation for traders to trade their goods. Artisans of Bengal for centuries have banked on these fairs to sell their products. Second, fairs would be a source of entertainment. One part of entertainment included games and funfair. Kite flying in Old Dhaka, bull racing in Munshiganj, wrestling in Chittagong still attract attention just as much as cockfights, pigeon racing, boat racing and many other forms of games and entertainment that have stood the test of time. Another part included songs. Originally, these songs started out as various forms of folk music that were localised. The final feature of entertainment includes the oral tradition of story telling of epics that still survives today. The kichchhas of Laili-Majnor, Yusuf-Zulekha, and Randha-Krishna are now a part of our

literature just as much as the *puthis*. By the twentieth century, Pahela Baishakh started to develop an identity truly of its own.

Rural celebrations of Pahela Baishakh slowly entered the urban setting. The Partition of British India witnessed Dhaka becoming the principal city of this country. This positively influenced Baishakhi celebrations. Several fairs would be celebrated in and around today's Puran Dhaka. The largest one was the Baishakhi Fair at Azimpur. However, for a long time the Dhaka Baishakhi Fairs remained an extension of their rural counterparts. It was evident sooner or later Pahela Baishakh would represent the heart of a Nation. Two institutes played pivotal roles towards this end. They are the Chhayanat and the Fine Arts Institute.

In 1965 the Chhayanat held the first of their many Baishakhi celebrations at the Ramna Batamul of Ramna Park. The location kept true to the rural heritage of fairs. It was beside a source of water and at the roots of a large tree. The mid sixties were turbulent times. Tagore's music was banned. When rulers lack wisdom they tend to treat music as their enemy. But then. Music and stories that remain in the hearts of men cannot be easily erased. Sooner or later the men of hearts wake up and with them awake an entire Nation.

The Ramna Batamul Baishakhi celebration was a defining moment in the history of Bangladesh. Tagore's *Esho Hey Baishakh* and the celebration of the Bangla New Year became synonymous to each other. The response from the people proved as long as songs and stories of freedom are alive a Nation will always be alive. The Baishakhi celebrations of Dhaka have now become a carnival. Chhayanat and the Fine Arts Institute have done a lot in preserving the Bangla culture for the next generation.

In the 1990s, Dhaka became a megacity. In spite of its problems, urbanisation does bring with it a market ready to consume goods. It is even the better if competition is associated with the growth of markets. Rapid urbanisation of Dhaka in recent

years has been beneficial to the transformation of Baishakhi celebrations. Today everybody who is anybody wants to hop on to the bandwagon of Baishakhi. The fashion industry, the food industry, the handicrafts and handmade toys industry all eagerly wait for Baishakhi. Competition to promote one's products with or without branded labels has had two beneficial effects. Innovation has lead to Bangla culture receive new creative dimensions in its presentation. The traditional panta-bhat and ilish bhaja still top the list of dishes on Pahela Baishakh.

Now comes the time for Baishakhi to impress. Wherever the people of Bangladesh have gone, they have taken with them two things their food and their cultural expressions. It is just a matter of time that the hard labour and the creative genius of our people surfaces. We all know that Indian food in the UK is a Bangladeshi version of the food from the sub-continent that has now replaced the Fish and Chips of the Brits. What many of us do not know is that the Baishakhi Festival at Brick Lane in London is the largest open-air Asian festival of Europe. After the Notting Hill Carnival, "our" Baishakhi Festival is the second largest street festival in the UK that attracts 80K plus people from UK and Europe. Small wonder the celebration started only in 1997! What more can one say about the positive image we have the potential to show the world?

Akbar the Great would probably be smiling if he were reading all this. The Great man's decision to create a Bangla calendar to ensure funds to run the empire has certainly yielded more revenue than his wildest imagination. Shabash Bangladesh! And Shubho Nababarsha.

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