

Dawn of Mongol Shobhajatra Jessore, then Bangladesh

MOHAMMEL SHUVO, Jessore

People from the small and serene town of Jessore woke up early morning on the first day of Baishakh of 1392 Bangla year, April 14, 1985, to the beats of Bangla drums. Their surprise changed to wonder when they saw 400 colourfully attired people, mostly children, dancing to the beats of drums and other Bangla folk musical instruments. The processionists paraded through the town wearing colourful crowns, bearing colourful masks of animals. People, who witnessed the procession, witnessed history, the history of a colorful procession - Mongol Shobhajatra -- at the dawn of Pahela Baishakh.

Some years later, Dhaka Fine Arts Institute brought out a similar procession in 1989, the brainchild of three youths: Mahabub Jamal Shamim, Moklesur Rahman and Heronmoy Chanda who were the pioneers of the Jessore procession. Soon the colourful Mongol Shobhajatra spread countrywide and became an integral part of Bangla culture.

Sculptor Mahabub Jamal Shamim recalls the history of Mongol Shobhajatra.

In his words:

"We did not want to be limited to a small canvas. We wanted to spread fine arts across the country. The entire country was a single canvas for us. With this philosophy, Moklesur Rahman a print artist, painter Heronmoy Chanda and I went back to Jessore in 1985 to establish a unique Fine Arts Institute after we had graduated. With the support of our teacher, sculptor Habiduzzaman, we established Charupitha, a fine arts institute in Jessore on February 8, 1985 at the old building of Jessore MM College at Puratan Kasba in the town. The



PHOTO: RUDWAN ALI RUPON

institute needed an introduction to the Jessore residents, so we took the initiative of a colourful procession to pay our tributes to the language martyrs on February 21.

After the success of that initiative we decided to take the people of Jessore by

surprise on the first day of the Bangla year. Around 300 children of our art students were dressed as prince, princesses, flowers, birds etc. We carried bright masks, models of animals and other items related to Bangla heritage. We arranged a local musical team

for our procession. We wanted to establish Pahela Baishakh as a festival or rather a carnival for all religions.

On 6 pm of the Bangla year 1392, the first drum beat heralded our festival. We marched down the town roads with children

dancing to the harmony of Bangla musical instruments. The townspeople were astonished when they saw our procession and we were thrilled by their response. Next year other cultural organisations from Jessore joined us in the procession. We were obstructed by the religious fundamentalists on the third year of our Mongol Shobhajatra as it was the month of Ramadan. They submitted an application to the concerned authorities to stop our procession. But we strongly protested against their interference and brought out our procession with more colour and music.

Dhaka

In 1988 we returned to Dhaka to complete our post graduation. Dhaka Fine Arts Institute was going through a crisis due to political instability. We decided that we would spread some joy and try to bring some semblance of normalcy. We secretly arranged a colourful procession on the occasion of Zainul Festival the same year. As in the past we had masks, models of animals and traditional instruments to the tune of Bangla musical instruments at the inauguration of Zainul Festival on December 31. To our delight the institution reverberated with gaiety. They forgot all divides: Awami League-BNP; teachers-students spontaneously joined the procession that paraded through the Dhaka University campus.

Later, the institute took the initiative to bring out a similar procession the next Pahela Baishakh in 1989 which was Bangla 1396. The procession was named Mongol Shobhajatra. The next year Mymensingh and Barisal took out the Mongol Shobhajatra.

And thus the Mongol Shobhajatra became a national phenomenon.

It was not so long ago that Baishakh tiptoed up to me, at home away from home.

Grim foggy London was finally waking up to spring. From my living room at Canary Wharf, the Thames sparkled like jewels. The seagulls perched lazily by the waterfront, thawing out after a cold winter. Young couples took to boating, cycling or jogging beside the river. Trees discarded their dead branches for lush green foliage, resembling huge roadside chandeliers.

On the way to the Royal London Hospital

Appreciating the delightful change in nature, I caught a glimpse of the posters by the busy roads. Colourful picturesque masks like those that crop up at every Baishakh Festival in Dhaka. Did I see it right? But this was London! I looked through the rear window and confirmed that Baishakh Mela was to be held on 8 May 2011 on Brick Lane. Brick Lane in East London, referred to as Bangla Town, is an authentic area for Bangladeshi cuisine and the one place in the UK where street names are etched in Bengali.

Unsure of what to expect, I finally decided to make the 10 minute walk and pay a short visit with family and friends.

The mela had already started at 12 noon, marked by a colourful procession

brought out by the local youth and community groups. I reached the massive park at 5pm, half expecting that the crowd had dispersed by then.

To my surprise, I watched the crowd in awe -- there must have been over 100,000 people marching, dancing, slurping and singing on a bright, sunny day.

"We have come to introduce our children to the Baishakh Mela that we miss so much," said a housewife, Rehana Pervez. "Our children love the desi items such as phuchka and chaptati. Even though the price is exorbitant we want them to enjoy it," added her husband, Abu Hena Mustafa Kamal.

I watched from afar, the stream of ladies dressed gorgeously in white and red jamdani and cotton saris, and men in

yellow, flowers bedecking their hair -- all rushing to the mela ground. This was no different than what we see and experience back home in Bangladesh on Pahela Baishakh.

A huge stage at the furthest corner was set up for the cultural programme.

Different organisations performed Bangla songs, starting from Tagore, Nazrul, Hason Raja to the contemporary hits. "Next year we plan to stage jatra," added one of the organisers. Young girls and boys danced at will to the tune of "Babu ka banalo re", a Hason Raja composition.

A deep sense of pride filled my heart.

As part of Chhayanaut, we were among a handful of artists who had started celebrating Pahela Baishakh in Dhaka. It has now stretched far and wide and is being observed with much festivity at the other side of the world!

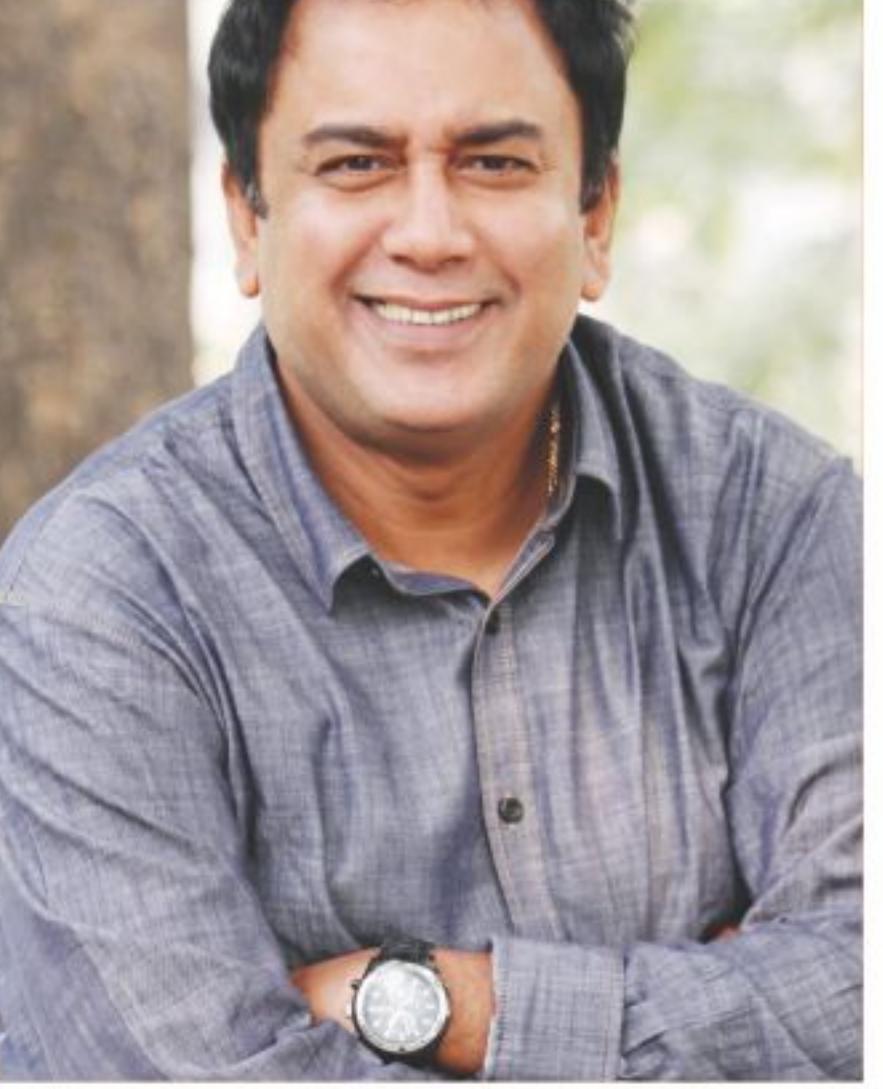
It was late and we had to return home. One could sense the feeling of pride rippling through in the audience, a quiet confidence that despite being miles away from home, the cultural roots had not withered away in neglect. This was home away from home, or as the saying goes "home is where the heart is."

STAR GAZING Celebrations of Bangaliana

SHAH ALAM SHAUZI

The season of celebration is back again. Bangalees all around the globe usher in the Bangla New Year, and media personalities are not immune to the spirit of festivities. Our media personalities are not immune to the spirit of festivities and at Pahela Baishakh they reaffirm their Bangali identity. Embracing the Bangaliana within, stars join the celebrations with others. Several media personalities shared their Pahela Baishakh plans with The Daily Star.

Zahid Hasan



Zahid Hasan



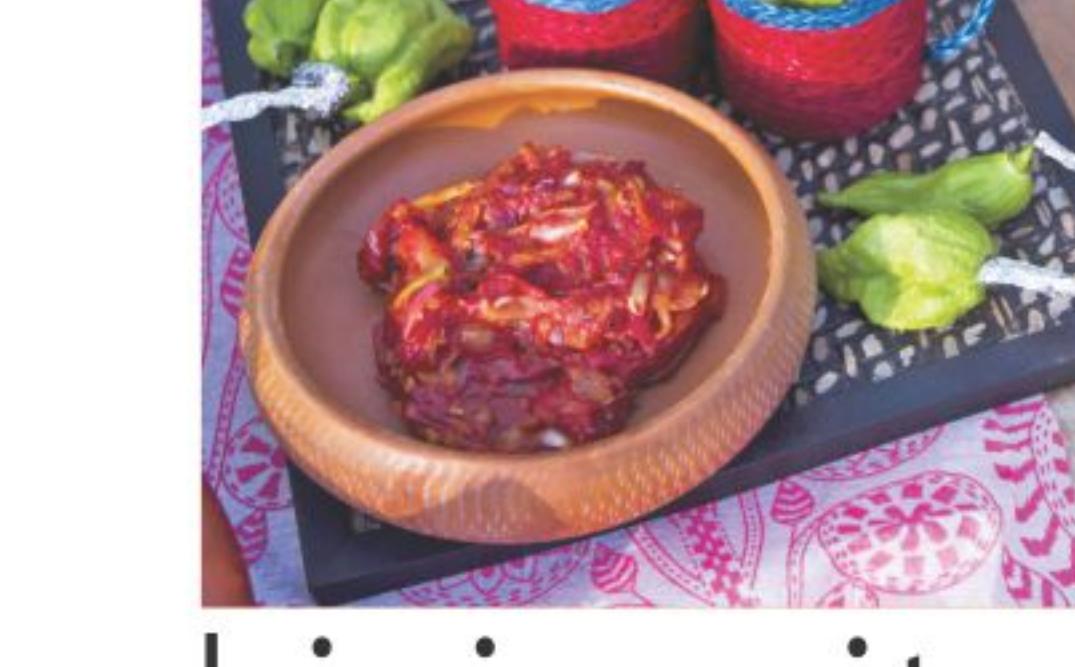
Mahfuz Ahmed



Purnima



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Pahela Baishakh beyond Bangladesh

KASHFIA NAHREEN BILLAH,
New Jersey

Just the other day, Sadya Afreen Mallick was chatting with me about the Bengali community's Pahela Baishakh celebrations in New Jersey. My first reaction was "But we really do not do much over here." Then I thought a little harder about last years' Pahela Baishakh and realised that we actually did and do quite a lot. How could I forget the Baishakh dinner invitation to a friend's house last year where every woman wore sari of Boishakhi hues with the typical Bengali touch. I wore an off white embossed kota with the dark red border that my mother had sent. I also coaxed my husband, Khondokar Yusuf Razee Billah, to wear a white panjabi (which really should be called a Bengali) to look like a typical Bengali couple straight from Ramna Park.

To top it all, I bought this cane tray with a netted topper from Bed, Bath and Beyond, which everyone thought was obtained from a Bangladeshi village (living up to the "Beyond" part of the store's name). The tray was filled with delicacies picked up from a nearby Bangali grocery store. These days you can get almost every deshi item at these grocery stores starting from koi, ilish machhi to shorsher tel, pittha, muri, kochur shag, kathaler bichi to chomchom, kalojam, roshmalai and roshogolla.

Everyone at the dinner was dressed in typically colourful Baishakh get-up. My friend Dora had prepared the typical Bangla feast of mach, bhapa, bhajji, bhorta, daal along with the usual polao-korma, which of course is an undeniable part of the Bangla dawat menu.

The Baishakh night was complete, accompanied by loud adda with the women chatting away about the latest saris in the Dhaka market and Jackson Heights. The men in the other room were louder with their discussions of the stock market and Dhaka politics. Usually, there would be an episode of gaan-bajna by the local singers in the group but that night the adda and the food had taken over.

Talking about gaan-bajna, there is no shortage of cultural events during Pahela Baishakh. Various Bengali cultural groups, associations, organisations, societies, families arrange a wide range of programmes. Starting from Baishakh mela with various Bangla food stalls to musical programmes, theater performances by invited celebrities from Dhaka, the programmes are unending. There are so many events these days that it is getting increasingly difficult to keep track and even more difficult to select and attend one. The Bengali community and the cultural activities have grown tremendously in NJ.

After a late night hoichoi at Dora's, as we stepped out, the still freezing NJ winter night made us huddle our winter coats. There were soft flurries falling quietly. Even in friendly shops on Dhanmondi road Five and in Chandni Chowk not far off, owners and workers will fill your appetite with sweetmeats and bright flowers, in memory of the book-keeping days of yore. Where else can one find such ready camaraderie?

Flowers and face paintings make the day more of fun and festivity. The writer is a noted singer and an engineer by profession.



Salahuddin Lavli



Kona



Chanchal Chowdhury



Bindu



Living it up in Baishakh

FAYZA HAQ

Enjoying "Pahela Baishakh" is next to living it up in the two Eids. The jollity, eating of smoked "hilsa", exchanging jokes, the camaraderie and high pranks know no limit. At Nirun's it means her gaggle of sweet, gentle sisters and mother are there for you to no end of food, especially the fish.

I was told the "hilsa" sits for hours as it bakes slowly, and the bones gradually melt. Pickles, chutney and other concoctions gather at the table. The occasion may also be compared to Christmas, the world over. One shares jokes, and a good, solid meal -- like a duck, which is seasoned, sliced and shared at Yueteidie.

Shiny clay pots and matching plates and dishes are often flaunted at the major shops. Mothers will struggle through making mango fool for her young ones. The table would be laden with goodies from all the visitors to please the mother in law. No one wants to leave out in the season of "hilsa" far even if it is "Ilish-Polau", or "Ilish" cutlets, where potatoes and bread-crumbs have been added for those carefree with diets.

Parsley and mustard seasoning are another variety which the husbands relish, they say. When the king "hilsa" is on the table, says my friend Shahida -- for whom the in-law approval is a must for the festive season.

On the bright day of "Pahela Baishakh", my friends Maksud, the pen-and-ink artist, and his wife -- the doll-like Shumi, had "baked hilsa" as if it were "on the fist day of Christmas my true love gave to me."

Shops along Banani and Dhanmondi will have "shalwar kameez" of "khadi

stitch" in silks, cottons and new blends.

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Kashfia and Razee Billah.



ATN BANGLA

11:20 Businesses & Finance
06:15 Shustha Thakur
09:20 Drama Serial: DB
11:30 Drama Serial: Boir
Baishakh

Desh TV

03:02 Gaan R Gaan
06:00 Hajar Konthie Koti
Bangali's Borschobon
Film: Kirtankhola
Baishakh Ranna
07:50 Nizam Shabeer Bhoot

CHANNEL i

06:30 PEPSI IPL 6, Kolkatta
Knight Riders VS
Sunrisers Hyderabad
IPL Power Play

Gtv

09:00 Bangla Feature Film
Bindon Saran
08:00 Drama Serial: Mama

CHANNEL 9

09:00 Bangla Feature Film
PEPSI IPL 6, Kolkata
Knight Riders VS
Sunrisers Hyderabad
IPL Power Play

RADIO

abc Radio FM 89.2
09:30 Edik Odik
05:30 Kacha Larka
06:30 Mitha Kara
07:20 GP Lounch
07:45 Megh Barata
09:30 Love Hour
11:00 Hindi Hits
11:30 Hindi Hits
12:00 Good Morning Dhaka
10:00 Today's Adda

RADIO FOORTI

07:30 Hello Dhaka
04:00 U Turn

RADIO

Morning Express
No Tension
Dhaka Calling

RADIO

12:30 Full Volume

RADIO

Back to Back music

RADIO

Once Upon a Time

RADIO

Armed Forces

RADIO

Happy Feet Two

RADIO

Star World

RADIO

My Week with Marilyn

RADIO

One Tree Hill

RADIO

The Big Bang Theory

RADIO

Arrow

RADIO

A Bug's Life

RADIO

Discovery Channel

Rtv

Man vs. Wild

Rtv