

Dawn of Mongol Shobhajatra

Jessore, then Bangladesh

MOKAMMEL 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 Shovajatra -- 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 Heronmay 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 Heronmay Chanda and I went back to Jessore in 1985 to establish a unique Fine Arts Institution after we had graduated. With the support of our teacher, sculptor Habibuzzaman, we established Charupith, 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: RIDWAN AYOUB 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.

Celebrating Home, Away from Home

Baishakh Mela in London

SADYA AFREEN MALLICK

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 Baishakhi Festival in Dhaka. Did I see it right? But this was London! I looked through the rear window and confirmed that Baishakhi 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 munching, dancing, slurping and singing on a bright, sunny day.

"People have come from all over Europe," said poet Shameem Azad. "The Boishakhi Mela (New Year Festival), organised by the Tower Hamlet, has been



PHOTO: STAR

held for the last 14 years," added Azad, the chairperson of the London Branch of Bishwa Shahitya Kendra.

At the entrance of the carnival, children were screaming in delight as the roller coasters soared perilously towards the sky. The stalls offering phuchka, chatpati, cotton candy, kulfi, khichuri, biriyani set all around the mela premises were packed with eager foodies.

It seemed nothing short of the Bangladeshi Baishakhi Mela transplanted in the heart of London.

"We have come to introduce our children to the Baishakhi Mela that we miss so much," said a housewife, Rehana Perveen. "Our children love the desh items such as phuchka and chatpati. 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 colourful panjabi, the toddlers clad 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 "Baula ke banailo 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 is now stretched far and wide and is being observed with much festivity at the other side of the world!

By 6pm we reached Oxford House where more surprise awaited us. Bishwa Shahitya Kendra UK had arranged a special programme celebrating the 150th



PHOTO COURTESY: STAR LIFESTYLE ARCHIVE

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.

One is 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, presents and a good, solid meal -- like a duck, which is seasoned, sliced and shared at Yuletide.

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 "lilish-Polai", or "lilish" cutlets, where potatoes and bread-crumbs have been added for those careful 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 first day of Christmas my true love gave to me."

Shops along Banani and Dhanmandi road Five and in Chandni Chawm not far off, owners and workers will fill your appetite with sweetsmeats and bright flowers, in memory of the book-keeping days of yore. Where else can one find such ready camaraderie?

Flowers and paint paintings make the day more of fun and festivity.

Pahela Baishakh beyond Bangladesh

KASHFIA NAHREEN BILLAH, New Jersey

Just the other day, Sadya Afreeen Mallik 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 Baishakhi 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 Bengali grocery store. These days you can get almost every desh item at these grocery stores starting from koi, ilish machi to shorsher tel, pitha, muri, kochur shag, kathalar bichi to chomchom, kalojam, roshmalai and roshogolla.

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

The Baishakhi 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 Bangla cultural groups, associations, organisations, societies, families arrange a wide range of programmes. Starting from Baishakhi mela with various Bangla food stalls to musical programmes, theatre 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 in our winter coats. There were soft flurries falling quietly, making the pathway slippery under my sandaled feet. I thought: we were the fortunate few to experience the cold, serene snow outside while keeping the warm glow of Baishakh in our hearts.

The writer is a noted singer and an engineer by profession.

SHAH ALAM SHAZU

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 Bengali 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
Pahela Baishakh is a very special day for me. I have a lot of fun with my family on the day. Ilish and *Panta bhat* are most certainly on the menu. We also enjoy a wide assortment of sweets. Every Pahela Baishakh, it feels like the whole nation is awake for celebrations. It is one of those days when people of all religion celebrate a single occasion. I fondly remember the childhood days of celebrating Pahela Baishakh, when I'd sometimes be unable to sleep the night before; such was the excitement. Buying novelty items at the fairs was also another key attraction. I'd often buy flutes.

Mahfuz Ahmed
I will spend this Pahela Baishakh in Australia, along with my wife and daughter. Although we are going there on vacation, we plan to welcome the New Year through celebrations with the expatriates. We will dress up in traditional outfits and enjoy Bangalee food. Pahela Baishakh celebrations take me back to my childhood days. I used to live in a village, where Baishakhi mela was a mandatory feature of the day. I used to visit the fair with my family and roam around with my friends. Putul Naach (puppet show) was one attraction at the fairs that I never missed.

Purnima
I stay busy with my work throughout the year; but on this day, I turn into a complete Bangalee. I spend Pahela Baishakh with my family. *Panta-ilish* and *bhorta* is a tradition at my house, and this year won't be any different. The best part about this special day is how it inspires all to usher in the New Year with goodwill. I also recall the fun I had riding the Nagordola (Ferris wheel) during my childhood Pahela Baishakh days.

Ferdous
Pahela Baishakh doesn't belong to any individual; it's a day for all Bangalees. This is the best aspect of the day. I try to keep my shooting schedule free on the day. It feels good to spend the first day of the year with



Zahid Hasan



Mahfuz Ahmed



Purnima



Ferdous



Salahuddin Lavlu

my family, and this year will be the same. I become nostalgic about my childhood Pahela Baishakh days, which were all spent in Dhaka. I fondly remember going to the Ramna Batamul celebrations.

Salahuddin Lavlu
Pahela Baishakh makes me nostalgic. I used to take money from my mother and run to the *mela* on this day. It was a day of great fun. I still remember the excitement of buying new kites and pen-knives, for cutting mangoes. I will stay in Dhaka this year on Pahela Baishakh, and celebrate the day in traditional Bangalee style.

Kona
Pahela Baishakh is a very important day to me. All Bangalees -- rich and poor, young and old -- join in their own way to mark the day with festivities. I plan on spending some time with my family on the day. But I will also have to wait till the rest of the day for music, as there are many stage shows on the day. I will welcome the New Year with the audience. Looking back at earlier Pahela Baishakh celebrations, I used to wheedle my parents when I wanted to buy something from the fair, and eventually succeeded in my persuasive skills.



Kona



Chanchal Chowdhury

Chanchal Chowdhury
I was born and brought up in Pabna. The Pahela Baishakh mela at our village drew people from several nearby villages, and I always had a long wish-list of items to buy. I liked to buy flutes, which I enjoyed playing. Circuses, *palagan* and *putul naach* were all a regular part of the fair. I remember that I once got very scared while watching the circus performances. Although the schedules are tight, I make some time on this day to enjoy special dishes with my close ones over a good *adda*. I also like to go out in the afternoon or in the evening to



Bindu

enjoy the occasion.

Bindu
I feel that nothing else can be compared with Pahela Baishakh. The day has been entwined with our culture for hundreds of years. There is no place in Bangladesh where people don't celebrate the day with enthusiasm. People from all religion and classes join in the festivities and have fun together. Like every year, my mother will cook special Bangalee cuisine at home, for which I will be assisting her. I hope the day brings in betterment for everyone.

ATN BANGLA	12:35	Bangla Feature Film
11:20	Business & Finance	Drama Serial: Thana
06:15	Shushtha Thakan	Nam Shonar Akhra
09:20	Drama Serial: DB	Dhruopodi Kahini
11:30	Drama Serial: Boiri	Shimana Periyee
Batash		
Desh TV		
03:02	Gaan R Gaan	
06:00	123 Sisimpur	
08:15	Drama Serial: Radio	
	Chocolate	
09:45	Tribute to Legend	
Maasranga Television		
10:02	Bangla Feature Film	
06:30	Binodan Saradin	
Drama Serial: Bilu		
Mama		
CHANNEL 9		
09:00	Bangla Feature Film	
04:30	PEPSI IPL-6, Kolkata	
08:45	Knights Riders VS	
09:00	Sunrisers Hyderabad	
	IPL Power Play	
CHANNEL 24		
06:30	Hriday Joage	
	Mangalade	
08:30	Musical programme: OI	
	Nutoner Ketan Ore	
11:45	Drama Serial: Chumbok	
ntv		
08:45	Ruchi Baishakhi Utsab	
	1420	
02:30	Baishakhi Concert	
09:00	Tomakhi Khujche	
	Bangladesh	
11:00	Brikhko Othoba Joler	
	Kabyo	

abc Radio FM 89.2	10:00	Morning Express
09:30	Edik Odik	No Tension
05:30	Kacha Lanka	Dhaka Calling
06:30	Mitha Kara	Full Volume
07:20	CP Jewels	Back to Back music
07:45	Mujib Rasta	RADIO TODAY FM 89.6
09:30	Love Hour	Green FM
11:10	Hindi Hits	Good Morning Dhaka
RADIO FOURTI	12:00	Today's Adda
07:30	Hello Dhaka	U turn

Ushering in Bangla New Year 1420
On BTV at 06:15am
Live from Ramna Batamul Organiser:

Borshoboron Programme
On Channel 9 at 06:30am
Live from Bangbandhu Int'l Convention Centre Organiser: Shurer

Baishakhi Concert
On ntv at 02:30pm
Live Musical Programme

ETV		Fox Movies	
03:30	Ekushey-er Business	04:00	Brave
04:30	Documentary: Jibon	05:35	This Means War
	Baitay	07:15	Once Upon A Time
06:30	Desh Jurey Oposadh	09:25	X-Men: First Class
	Porikroma		
12:05	Ekushey-er Raat	HBO	
		01:30	Happy Feet Two
Boishakhi TV		03:25	Shaolin Soccer
10:45	Bangla Feature Film	05:15	Armageddon
06:15	Drama Serial: Gupta	09:30	Happy Feet Two
	Dhon	11:34	Rush Hour
08:35	Spot Light	Star World	
11:00	Reporters Dairy	12:30	My Week with Marilyn
BANGLAVISION		02:30	One Tree Hill
11:05	Gaan O Road Show	07:30	The Big Bang Theory
08:15	Ananda Bedonar Kabbo	08:30	Arrow
08:50	Drama: Sikandar Box	10:30	A Bug's Life
	Ekhon Orek Bor	Discovery Channel	
11:20	Concert	01:30	Man vs. Wild
Rtv			

ATN BANGLA	08:40pm	Shonghar Shukher	Chumbok
		Hoy Bedonar Guney	Maasranga Television
Channel i	07:50pm	Nizam Shahab	Khonikaly
			Maa
ntv		Brikhko Othoba Joler	Pancho Premik
Channel 24		Kabyo	Boishakhi TV
			Ognipath
11:45	Drama Serial:		Apon Chor
			Oloshpur

BTV	News (Bangla) at 12pm, 2pm, 5pm, 8pm.	Boishakhi TV	News (Bangla) at 10am, 2pm, 5pm.
	News (English) at 10am, 4pm, 10pm.		News (English) at 9am, 6pm.
ATN BANGLA	News (Bangla) at 11am, 12pm, 2pm, 7pm, 10pm.	BANGLAVISION	News (Bangla) at 10am, 2pm, 7:30pm, 10:30pm.
	News (English) at 9am, 6pm.		News (English) at 1pm, 3pm, 6pm, 9pm.
CHANNEL i	News (Bangla) at 2pm, 9pm, 10:30pm.	Rtv	News (Bangla) at 1:45pm, 6:45pm, 10:45pm.
ntv	News (Bangla) at 2pm, 7:30pm, 10:30pm.	Desh TV	News (Bangla) at 2pm, 7pm, 9pm, 11pm.
ETV	News (Bangla) at 1pm, 3pm, 5pm, 7pm, 9pm, 11pm.		News (Bangla) at 7pm, 1am.

ATN BANGLA	01:00am	Onno Drishti	ETV	10:10pm	Media Gossip
Desh TV	11:00pm	Madhyastar	Boishakhi TV	12:00am	Zero Hour
		Muktakab			
CHANNEL i	01:00am	Grameenphone Ititiyo	Rtv	11:20pm	Our Democracy
		Maa	Desh TV	11:45pm	Shuja Katha
ntv	12:00am	Ei Shomoy			Maasranga Television
CHANNEL 24	12:00am	Madhyastar			Shampark
	12:05am				