

LET IT RAIN...

Dr Mahbub Pial explores the long history of rain rituals in Bangladesh

THE Bangladeshi people irrespective of rural or urban background learn music growing up, which may not be part of their preferences in later life. One of the songs among those hundreds of tunes that we have heard in our childhood is *Allah megh de pani de chaya dere tui Allah megh de* (O Allah! Give us cloud, rain-water and shade). This song became very popular when recorded by renowned singer Abbas Uddin Ahmed many decades ago. The composer of the song was Jalal Uddin Khan from Netrokona who is well-known as a great folk poet.

The song reveals the sufferings of local people in rural Bangladesh when there is no rain for a long period. Farmers cry as they are not able to gather food for their families and cattle. The land dries up and there is no water in the canal, river or pond. People, being helpless and seeing the wrath of nature start praying for rain. Besides this particular song, which is recognised nationally, there are many locally evolved folk rituals conducted at the community level. This rain ritual in our country has a long history as it has derived from a distinctive agrarian heritage.

The ritual performed to invite rain is an ancient practice around the world. People all around the globe, particularly in the tropical countries, conduct this ritual for rain through dances and music. From Native Americans to Zimbabweans, from indigenous people of Papua New Guinea to Indian farmers, almost all

rice. Women fetch water in the pitchers and pour it on the frogs' basket. Boys and girls tumble on this water. The song that I heard in my childhood in Brahmanbaria goes like this:

*Megh Rajare tui amar suddor bhai
 Ek guri Megher laiga duar bhijjya jai
 Duar bhijjya jaite jaite monai dilo fal
 ek ushtha da falai demu kochu kheter
 file*

*Benger zhiyer biya shonar medel diya
 alo bengi megh diya ja
 Megh dila jemon temon duar bhijlona*

frog! Please bring in some rain for this reason.]

The local people always add new words to the existing lyrics e.g. they have introduced the idea of the groom party on a motorcade consisting of seventeen vehicles. It also provides an idea about how the technological advancement was perceived by the local people. I heard a similar version of songs collected from Karimganj in the district of Kishoreganj. The frogs' marriage is also emphasised here.

believers of all religions in an agrarian community as everyone depends on nature for rain to cultivate the crop.

According to this folk belief local people think that in the month of Ashar (rainy season) frogs shout with the monsoon rain. They think that if they could make the frogs happy by arranging a marriage between male and female frogs they would commence their spawning activities. This will satisfy the 'Cloud King' or nature and as a result rain would be

indigenous communities. The longing for rain and prayer to the Creator were added later.

Moreover, this reveals the syncretistic practices, which irrespectively unite all communities and followers of all religions when they are exposed to problems related to nature. This is a natural response of local people that was culturally developed to address issues like changing features of the environment and climate.



The traditional 'Banger Biye' (Frog Wedding) in the hope of a downpour.

*nabi shotto Allah keno megh dilaina
 Houra khailo poke dhan khailo loke
 mega meg boiya roise ganger kule*

[O Cloud King! You are my own brother, our door steps are drying up due to no rain. Although it is raining it is not enough. Our Prophet is true; Please Allah, give us rain. The marriage of frog's daughter is arranged with a medal made of gold. So, the female frog gives some rain. The mustard seeds were eaten by insects when rice grains were eaten by people. Male and Female frogs, both of them are sitting on the bank of the river.]

The lyrics vary from place to place but frogs are the protagonists in this event. I have collected another version of the song from Chunerughat under the district of Habiganj:

*Benga bengir biya patal mathai diya
 O bengha megh ano megh ano giya
 Khalo naire pani bilo naire pani
 O bengha meg ano meg ano giya
 Benga bengir biya sholo motor diya
 O bengha meg ano meg ano giya*

[A marriage would be arranged between male and female frogs wearing a bamboo hat. O Male frog! Please bring in some rain for this reason. There is no water in the canals. O Male frog! Please bring in some rain for this reason. Frogs' marriage may be arranged with a groom party proceeding on a motorcade. O Male

IN connection to this, I remember one of my experiences with some folklore experts and learners in a Folklore workshop where I was invited to facilitate a session on Bangla Folk Music. At one stage, I showed some video footage of the rain ritual songs collected during my field work. Folklorists were a bit confused whether this should be considered as a magical or musical performance. The problem with folklorists is that they classify events on the basis of *genre* and consider them as an independent performance without having sufficient understanding of the local culture. But life has more than one dimension where people's ideology, belief, musical performance, livelihood strategies etc. are interconnected and it is quite difficult to see them as separate entities. Anthropology as a discipline always tries to grasp the whole mosaic of such practices.

From this point of view a question can be raised why frog's marriage is so much emphasised in the rain ritual song. I have been trying to find a reasonable answer to this and also to inquire into the elements in similar rituals observed in different parts of the country. The frog marriage refers to a folk belief that derives from magico-religious practices followed by



PHOTOS: MAHBUB PIAL

falling instantly. Even today indigenous groups with their animist practices carry on performing similar rituals, which are very much related to the notion of controlling nature.

I visited a Munda village in Birampur thana under the district of Dinajpur about a decade ago. People in this community are animists. They worship the sun as they think it is the source of all energies. At that time they were singing a song followed by a dance. The meaning of the song as it was explained by them went like this: 'we have cultivated mustard seeds, onion, rice and paddies; Nature, please give us good yield'.

They have other practices similar to this ritual which are associated with everyday practices of their lives. Like the Munda community there are many *jati* (ethnic groups) representing diverse range of ethnic identities. Bangladeshi culture inherited many of the beliefs and practices from the ancestry of its distant past. These rituals and practices are changing and taking new forms where elements of the past practices are sometimes mixed up with newly introduced practices. The mentioning of *Megh Raja* (the Cloud King) and the request for rain to the male and female frogs are derived from the ancient folk belief, still upheld by other existing

A few years ago it was reported in some electronic media that people in some parts of the country were doing this rain ritual in the month of July and August instead of May and June as there was no rainfall during this period. It usually rains heavily during this period. So the local people have shifted their rain ritual event in response to the climate change and variation. This reveals the significance of indigenous knowledge practice that allows us to understand how the local people perceive changes in their climate and how they respond to this problem. Unfortunately the relevance of local knowledge and culturally significant events like rain ritual are not often taken into consideration by the climate change experts.

However, the event of frogs' marriage and rain ritual practice is not only significant as a folklore genre but also because it gives us a cultural insight regarding tolerance and dependence on each other through this folk belief and performance. This also helps us understand how the members of our traditional society, through these syncretistic practices, maintain social coherences and address their real life problems.

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groups of people observe this event during the drought period in order to invite the rain.

The rain ritual in Bangladesh is followed by a singing event. The main aspects of this whole event centre around organising a marriage between frogs. A group of young boys and girls in the village catches two frogs and tie them on a *kula* (winnowing-fan) with scrub and twigs. They take it on their head and move from door to door to beg for rice and paddies. They go in a procession and sing loudly to attract the Cloud King. Members of the households provide them with some



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