



The soul in enduring clay

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THE earth rotates on its axis. The seasons change, and my soul throbs to the rhythm of the Bengal delta. The elements of air, water, earth, and fire call out to me with the first whiff of the Bengali New Year. As I yearn for release from the sweltering *Chaitra* heat, the month of *Baishakh* beckons with low, growling thunder and the distant, jagged flash of silver lightning. I look up at the wide, blue-black canopy of the sky for the tumultuous harbinger of *Pahela Baishakh*, the heavenly benediction in the form of the approaching *Kalboishaki*. My trembling body anticipates the glorious delight of the gift of dark cumulous clouds carrying florets of drenching rain, and my long tresses float in the wild stream of the furious nor'wester. The howling treetops surrender their weak and dead limbs in the wake of the storm's epic sweep, and Bengal reverberates to the song of renewal and rebirth.

I hear the red soil of Bengal ripple with the tangible, audible cry of the *Kalboishaki*. Pellets of hailstones hit thatched and tiled and corrugated tin roofs, and the sodden ground turns into a field of snaky, muddy rivulets. Nature energises the blood, and the village folk shake their lethargy to embrace laughter and productive labour. Mother-earth calls, 'Daub your huts with warm, wet clay, scour your earthen pots and pans with fistfuls of

quelching alluvial mud, slake your sun-burnt, parched skins by soaking in the bold rainfall. Inhale the smoky, intoxicating fumes of damp, native clay, and know your homestead. Till the field, and plant the paddy, and stand at sundown to gaze lovingly at the glistening horizon. Settle accounts, pay your debts, close the tattered cover of the old year's ledger, and welcome the New Year with the ritual opening of a pristine red *Halkhata*.'

Woefully, for me, this *Pahela Baishakh*, on April 14 2016, in the New Year 1423 of the Bengali calendar, my *Halkhata* will begin with the record of eternal parting. On *Pahela Baishakh*, my beloved father's body would have been fused with native clay, having lain in his final resting place for eighteen days and nights. The Potter had finally finished moulding him on the Wheel of life. The time had come for the soul's vessel, vassal to the Almighty, to return to the place whence it came: "Time's wheel runs back or stops: Potter and clay endure."

'Endurance' is the master-narrative of Bengali folk. Flood and famine, and nature's other seasonal, violent vicissitudes, have made us resilient and resolute. The unique geography and climate of the delta have given us slight, lithe, lissome physiques. Fed since ancient times upon plentiful rice and fresh sweet-water fish, Bengali folk have not bred swarthy warriors,

Potters and weavers and metalworkers and goldsmiths create dazzling, intricately-designed artifacts praised and highly prized by all who look upon them. Every harvest, or spring, autumn, and

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