



Bangali heritage, Pahela Baishakh and Chhayanaut



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It was not so long ago that we stumbled upon Baishakh at home away from home. Grim foggy London was finally waking up to spring. I caught glimpses of posters by the busy roads. Colourful picturesque masks like those that crop up at every Baishakhi Festival in Dhaka, dotted the streets. Did I see them right? But this was London! Just to be sure, I looked again through the rear window of the car - Baishakhi Mela was to be held on the first week of May!

Unsure of what to expect, I decided to join family and friends at the Mela at Brick Lane, also known as Bangla Town. It had already started at 12 noon, marked by a colourful procession brought out by local youth and community groups. I watched from afar the stream of ladies dressed gorgeously in white and red cotton saris, men in colourful Panjabi and the toddlers clad in yellow flowers, beads holding their curls in place. One could sense the feeling of pride rippling through in the audience, a sense of anticipation.

A deep sense of pride filled my heart that the iconic festival pioneered by Chhayanaut in Dhaka had stretched to the other side of the world! I remembered fondly those early days, when I first performed on the Chhayanaut stage as a child artiste, how the inspiration from the seniors and teachers helped get rid of my stage fright!

As Dhaka city now readies for *Pahela Baishakh*, preparations for the festival are storming ahead not only at Chhayanaut but also Shurer Dhara, Wrishij, Sangeet Bhabon and the Faculty of Fine Art (FFA), University of Dhaka. Meanwhile, popular bands and many other community organisations have special plans to make the festival memorable. And the entire Dhaka University campus will reverberate with festivity.

But everyone eagerly awaits pioneering music institution Chhayanaut's iconic programmes for *Pahela Baishakh*. Even today I can recall the hard work that went

into making the festival a success in the late sixties. Excitement would build up over the month-long rehearsals at Sanjida Khatun and Waheedul Haque's house in Azimpur.

At the crack of dawn we would dress in white saris with red borders and walk across the dew filled park. The organisers would work through the night before the big day and build a huge stage beneath the big "Ashath" tree, known popularly as "Botomul" (banyan tree). White and pink lotus flowers bloomed in the nearby serene lake. People could be seen taking boat rides and even a dip in the lake.

The serene ambiance of dawn soon mingled with the melodious tune of the sitar and flute. From the stage, we would watch people from all walks of life, looking fresh and elegant in their white attire. We would gaze curiously at the fashion-conscious girls who would drape themselves in saris in the traditional style.

It was 1967 when Chhayanaut took the initiative to celebrate the Bangla New Year. From then on it started hosting various seasonal programmes in addition to *Pahela Baishakh*, such as welcoming the monsoon, the spring, the birth and death anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam and fundraisers for the flood victims. These programmes went a long way to bring people together from a wide spectrum of society. The spontaneous and massive participation of the people multiplied every year and indicated their unity with the cultural movement.

The Pakistani rulers of that era were worried. Chhayanaut alumna Iffat Ara Dewan points out, "The festival was initially seen with a vindictive attitude by the then Pakistan authorities who made repeated attempts to divert the attention of the Bangalis."

But when Chhayanaut hosted the festival, eminent personalities such as Quamrul Hasan, Sufia Kamal, Mustafa Monwar and senior government officials joined in the celebrations. Veteran singers

Bilqis Nasiruddin, Fahmida Khatun and Afsari Khanam would occasionally take the stage. Golam Mustafa's recitation added an extra dimension to the event.

The programmes stuck to their philosophy over the years. It was purely to celebrate a rich culture and to acquaint the people with their roots -- it steadfastly steered clear of making divisive pledges and vows.

Chhayanaut signifies the shade of a tree. It was aptly named by the couple Saidul Hasan and Farida Hasan to represent an organisation under whose shade Bangali culture could be nourished and nurtured.

Chhayanaut has been blessed by a core group from its embryonic stage: Saira Mohiuddin (its first vice president), Ahmedur Rahman, Saifuddin, Dr. Sarwar Ali, Jamil Chowdhury, Muzharul Islam, Hosne Ara Islam, Hosne Ara, Dr. Noorunnahar Fyzennessa, Quamrul Hassan, Rashid Chowdhury, Debdas Chakravarti, and Nitun Kundu, to name a few. Noted painter Qayyum Chowdhury designed the insignia for Chhayanaut.

Over the years, Chhayanaut has been passionately led by a dedicated group of people such as Farida Hassan, Kamal Lohani, Ziauddin, Zahedur Rahim, Saifuddin, Iffat Ara Dewan and currently Khairul Anam as its general secretary. Chhayanaut would not be what it is today if it were not for mentors like Ustad Moti Miah, Sheikh Luthfur Rahman, Sohrab Hossain, Zahedur Rahim, Azad Rahman, Anjali Rai, Ustad Phul Mohammad, Ustad Khurshid Khan, Ustad Modon Gopal Das, Md. Shahjahan and more.

Artistes, litterateurs, painters and, most importantly, people from all sections sought beauty in melody, rhythm, art, Bangaliana and their everyday life. This became the driving force of the organisation. Under its shade, people found a common voice and a brotherhood of cultural enthusiasts developed.

Despite the peaceful nature of the school, it has been prone to deadly

attacks. The most horrific one was the 2001 bombing of the *Pahela Baishakh* programme that killed 10 people and injured hundreds. The *Pahela Baishakh* festivities had become an iconic Chhayanaut programme. People from far and wide congregated at Ramna Park to listen to the top talents of the school usher in the New Year through music. It was one of the most symbolic gatherings of people who shared a common Bangali identity and an ideal target for terrorists who wanted to destroy it.

"The bomb blast threw us into a dilemma," said Dr. Sanjida Khatun, president of Chhayanaut. The loss of life was extremely tragic. It also raised the question of whether we had been able to unite all sections of society in a common bond. However, as it turned out, the bond that people shared was truly strong. The following year, defying all expectations and fears of another attack, people in even greater numbers thronged the venue, united in defiance.

Chhayanaut, besides training aspiring artistes, also works for the betterment of people in times of national crises. In the '60s when Chittagong was hit by typhoon Gorki, Chhayanaut workers organised a parade through the streets and collected funds for the victims. During the Liberation War, Chhayanaut members formed the Bangladesh Mukti Sangrami Shilpi Shangstha and regularly visited the camps to lift the spirit of the Freedom Fighters.

Chhayanaut emerged as a role model for other cultural organisations over the years. Over 50 years since it came into being, the institution has not only given an impetus to social movements but also set the highest standards in the music sphere and counts as its alumni some of the finest artistes across genres like Tagore, Nazrul and folk music.

This Baishakh let us join hands to celebrate Chhayanaut and our heritage even more so.

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