



# Pahela Baishakh: The uniting legacy

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**H**ISTORICALLY the land of the Bangalis was never divided like it is today. Enriched by fertile Ganges delta, nourished by hundreds of mighty rivers and lying at the apex of the Bay of Bengal, this vast prosperous region of greater Bengal boasts of a rich, harmonious culture that has been evolved through many civilizations which once flourished here. Based on agriculture, the prosperous, dynamic Bangali society managed to unite a huge amount of people through its harmonious, inclusive and fascinating culture regardless of the individual differences in race and religion. Now, Bengal is divided. Parts of its ancient territory are now scattered in Nepal, West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Bihar, Orissa, Bangladesh, Manipur, Tripura and Jharkhand. However, one of the few cultural features that still remind us of the golden days of a united, harmonious Bengal is the celebration of Pahela Baishakh, the first day of Bangali New Year.

Bangali speaking people all over the subcontinent (read all over the world) celebrate this day with great festivity. Even non Bangali communities who were once part of the united Bengal celebrate this day with their unique cultural elements. This is one of the few celebrations that can include all communities regardless of their ethnic, religious and linguistic differences. It includes all people who have embraced Bengal as their homeland.

In Bangladesh, the celebration of Pahela Baishakh has reached its extremity. People from all walks of life come out to celebrate the first day of Bangali New Year ignoring the scorching summer heat as Pahela Baishakh means actually the first day of summer. Carnivals, cultural programmes, festive rallies, food festivals all these fun activities overwhelm the people of Bangladesh for the whole day of 14th April which has been officially declared as the first day of Bangali year by Bangla Academy although traditionally Bangali Hindus celebrate Pahela Baishakh on 15th April. However, besides Bangalis and Bangladeshis, this day is also grandly celebrated by different non Bangali communities. Indigenous communities in the hilly areas of Bangladesh, Assam, Tripura, Manipur, and West Bengal also celebrate this day as the first day of the New Year.

Chakma people who live mostly in Bangladesh, north-eastern India and in Burma celebrate Pahela Baishakh with a festival called Biju. The three-day long celebration starts from 29th of the last month of the departing year. On the first day Chakma people decorate their homes and temples with flowers collected from the forest. For this reason they call the day as "Flower Biju." The second day of the festival is called "Mul Biju". On this day, they prepare variety of cakes, curries and brew wine and hold rallies to welcome the New Year. Then on the first day of the New Year and the concluding day of the festival, the Chakmas visit pagodas to participate in

the religious services and pay respect to the village elders.

Sangrai is one of the most colourful and joyful celebration of Pahela Baishakh which is observed by Marma people, another dominant indigenous community of Bangladesh and north-eastern India. Besides preparing delicious food and performing ritual worships, the most joyful part of Sangrai is the water festival called Rilangpoe. During this festival, young Marma men and women, dressed in colourful traditional outfit and ornaments, throw water to each other while participate in beautiful courtship dance.

Boisu, the celebration of the first day of the Bangali calendar, is the main festival of Tripura people who live in a large part of North-East India and in the Chittagong hill tracts of Bangladesh. Starting on the last day of the passing year, Tripura people pass the first day of the festival in preparing and decorating their home and temples and offer a worship called Khumkaming. Preparing delicious food, brewing wine and participating in various kinds of sport and mock battles are the major events of the second day of the three days long festival. In the final day that is in the second day of the New Year, they worship to the gods for a better new year and visit the homes of their relatives.

While different indigenous communities have been observing the first day of Bangali New Year for generations, the recent version of Pahela Baishakh celebration by Dhaka-ites with cultural performance at Ramna Park and the

revised and developed Bangali calendar to facilitate tax collection in Bengal since its farmers faced great difficulty to pay the imperial tax according to lunar Hijri calendar which was not tuned with their harvesting season. Thus, with the introduction of Bangali calendar, living condition of the entire population of greater Bengal improved significantly. With bountiful harvest and suitable timing, paying tax became an occasion of celebration for the farmers of Bengal. Peasants used to pay tax happily on the first day of the New Year and the rulers also treated their subjects with sweets and delicious foods on that day.

Tagore called "Esho He Baishakh" in protest of Pakistan government's ban on performing the songs written by Tagore. Nowadays welcoming Bangali New Year with this song has become a tradition among all Bangalis. Thus, the celebration of Pahela Baishakh became the symbol of Bangali culture and this time it united the people of Bangladesh against the oppressive rulers of Pakistan.

After the emancipation of Bangladesh as a nation, the celebration of Pahela Baishakh got a new height with a fixed date, public holiday and new innovations such as, Mongol Shovajatra, Panta Ilish and cultural programmes at Ramna Park.



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colourful rally called Mongal Shobhajatra is actually a modern day invention. Although developed in 5th century (AD) in accordance with the Aryan scripture Surya Siddhanta, Bangali solar calendar was officially adopted and popularised by Mughal Emperor Akbar.

Upon his order, two of his officials named Fatullah Shirazi and Abul Fazal

It was the beginning of the celebration of Bangali New Year. At that time the first day of Bangali New Year did not necessarily begin with Baishakh (Summer) rather it used to change with the harvesting seasons; sometimes it began with Agrahayan (late autumn) and sometimes it began with Poush (Winter) depending on the time of harvest.

However, under the oppressive rule of zamindars appointed by British Raj, paying tax became an unbearable burden for the Bangali farmers and the celebration of Bangali New Year lost its splendour. Gradually this tradition was completely erased from a large part of people and existed within some practicing Hindus who used to arrange ritual worship and some small scale festivals on the day.

After the partition of Indian subcontinent in 1947, when Pakistani rulers started to demean Bangali tradition by imposing Urdu and West Pakistani culture, the cultural significance of Pahela Baishakh started to resurface. In 1954, after winning a landslide victory against Muslim league in the provincial election, Sher- E- Bangla A K Fazlul Huq declared Pahela Baishakh a public holiday. In 1965, the renowned cultural organisation called Chhayanaut started to organise a cultural programme at Ramna Park at the dawn of the first day of Bangali New Year. They welcomed the first day of the new year with a song written by Rabindranath

After being humiliated by the British and Pakistani rulers, this festival of common Bangalis is once again under dire threat. In 2001, series of explosions shook the stage of the performers at Ramna Park who were singing to welcome the New Year. The deadly attack killed hundreds of people on the spot. Similar explosions also ravaged the celebrations in several other districts of the country that year. In 2015, mass sexual harassment by the activists of pro-government student and youth party at the New Year's festival and government's reluctance to take any action against them shocked the entire nation. This year, without arresting any perpetrator of the last year's sexual assault, government imposed restriction on Pahela Baishakh celebration. On the other hand, the ruling party's mufti wing called Awami Olama League has thanked the government for the restrictions and demanded a general ban on Pahela Baishakh celebration terming it anti-Islamic.

The collective celebration of Pahela Baishakh by the different communities of the greater Bengal proves how harmoniously we used to live once upon a time. Observing Pahela Baishakh should not be just an occasion of enjoyment and merrymaking. Rather if we can utilise it to revive the lost glory of the people of Bangladesh, then the true essence of celebrating Pahela Baishakh will come into fruition.

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