

Pahela Baishakh in foreign lands

The thought of a hearty meal over steaming white rice, spicy-crunchy hilsa, and a peppery preparation of smelly but scrumptious dried fish makes most Bengalis salivate, especially on the first day of the Bengali calendar. Whether they are at home or 9,000 miles away from their roots, Bengalis' undying love for their food, culture and heritage keeps them spirited on any given day, and gives their children one more reason to be appreciative of their lineage.

Not just within the borders of Bangladesh, Pahela Baishakh celebration is a huge affair among Bangladeshi communities abroad, too. Events coordinated by Bangladeshi associations take place at homes, school premises and even stadiums!

Organised by Bangabandhu Council Australia, Pahela Baishakh celebrations held at Australia's Sydney Olympic Park, for instance, draw tens of thousands of Bengalis from all over Australia every year. Bangladeshi immigrants gather in Sydney from Melbourne, Brisbane, Canberra and other Australian cities to welcome the first day of the Bengali calendar.

The Sydney Baishakhi Mela, which will celebrate its silver jubilee in 2017, is now recognised as one of the most organised Bengali New Year celebrations outside of Bangladesh.

"More than 25,000 people welcomed the first day of Baishakh last year. It was an enormous crowd at the Sydney Olympic Park!" said Tauhidul Islam, 35, a Sydney resident and a software engineer by profession. "More than 70 stalls at the fair offered Bangladeshi food, clothing, jewellery, books

and crafts."

"The fragrance of delicious Bengali food, the sound of mellifluous Bengali music, and the bright colours of the festival instantly reminds one of Baishakhi celebration in Bangladesh. A major attraction of the annual Sydney Baishakhi Mela is the fireworks at the end of the day-long fair," Islam said.

I myself attended my first communal



celebration of Pahela Baishakh away from home in Minnesota, USA in 2012. Held inside the Black Hawk Middle School in Eagan, the Baishakhi gala featured Bengali music, dance, poetry recitation, a skit and a fashion show to highlight Bengali culture, clothing and traditions. The brightly-coloured backdrop of the performance stage was decked out in red, white and

yellow with "Esho Hey Boishakh, Esho Hey" hand-painted in Bengali.

The aroma of hilsa and rui deep-fried to a golden brown, bharta-bhaji, tangy-garlicky daal, pitha, spicy haleem, kebab, chotpoti and phuchka filled the chilly afternoon air of April. Rows of tables were selling not only delectable foods and drinks, but also shalwar kameez, kurta, sari and costume jewellery.

Men in colourful panjabis, and women draped elegantly in red and white saris with flowers tucked in their hairbuns reminded this Bangladeshi soul of the only time she had been to Ramna Batamul; it was the first day of the Bengali year 1400.

Bangladeshis abroad lovingly hold on to their culture and pass the Bengali traditions to their progeny. Children of Bangladeshi

immigrants learn to sing Bengali songs, recite Bengali poetry, and dance to Bengali tunes.

"Our Pahela Baishakh programme always features performances by our children, who eagerly look forward to the celebration every year," said Sabrina Syed, 38, a resident of Minnesota and a software systems analyst by profession. "It is an exciting occasion for them, especially for the little girls, who get to wear red and white traditional clothing, bangles and flowers."

"We also make bornomalas which the children carry just like they do at the Mongol Shobhajatra back home," she added.

Syed and her friends prepare for months for the Baishakhi Mela attended by Bangladeshis from all corners of Minnesota. "We find time out of our busy schedules to prepare for it. We have a music band whose members literally practice for three to four months for this day only," she said. "The child performers rehearse their Baishakhi performances on weekends and weekdays after school."

Bengalis' love for their culture and traditions runs so deep that they can never sever their ties with their homeland, no matter how far away they live. The spirit of Pahela Baishakh touches every Bengali soul whether they are at home or abroad!

By Wara Karim

Photo by Shaiful Alam and Tawhidur Rahman

Location: Pahela Baishakh celebrations organised by Bangladesh Foundation from Seattle, Washington, USA.



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