

Chhayanaut: From a seed to a protective tree

SADYA AFREEN MALLICK

As I entered the red brick Chhayanaut Sangskriti Bhaban in Dhanmondi, I was struck by its magnificence. The structure had remained true to the school's founding philosophy of "open door for all" -- the building purposefully has no perimeter walls. There was a constant mass of students, teachers, poets, artists, young and old streaming through the doors from dawn to dusk.

The classes for children with special needs and Nalonda, now in its 16th year, were closed in the evening, but the rest of the building was throbbing with activity. The halls were reverberating with choruses. In between the words, strumming of the sitars and melodic violin accompanied by the deep and rapid beat of the tabla and pakhawaj could be heard.

A wave of nostalgia swept over me as I remembered my student days. Chhayanaut was celebrating its 50th year of Borshoboron, and I was there to meet the person who had been one of the principal driving forces behind it -- Dr. Sanjida Khatun, President of Chhayanaut.

"Chhayanaut has always maintained a low profile, as we believe in work and not grandiose ideas for celebrations," she said. "You must remember that from your student days here."

She recalled how Chhayanaut started. It was winter and the erstwhile Pakistan government had intensified its attempts to stamp out Bengali identity and culture from East Pakistan. A group of energetic activists, angered by the military regime's latest tactics, decided to unite and defy the junta. To register their protest, they celebrated Rabindranath Tagore's birth centenary in May 1961, a radical step in those times, since there was a strict ban on Tagore, she went on.

After the successful celebration, the group reunited at a picnic in Joydevpur and contem-



plated continuing the movement. Members of this group included iconic figures such as Sufia Kamal, Mokhlesur Rahman Sidhu, Shamsunnahar Rahman, Ahmedur Rahman, Mizanur Rahman, Saifuddin Ahmed, Saidul Hasan, Farida Hasan, Waheedul Haque and, of course, Sanjida Khatun.

It is no surprise that such like-minded cultural activists found the regime stifling and they chose to fight it on the frontier they knew best: the cultural front. With poet Sufia Kamal at the helm, the group set in motion a silent but powerful cultural revolution. Chhayanaut was thus born.

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 Bengali culture could be nourished and nurtured. The task of building the organisation fell upon Waheedul Haque,

added a nostalgic Sanjida Khatun. He took on the role to promote all genres of music -- from classical, Nazrul Sangeet, Rabindra Sangeet to folk -- in their purest forms.

"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 was passionately led by a dedicated group of people such as Farida Hassan, Kamal Lohani, Ziauddin, Zahedur Rahim, Saifuddin, Iffat Ara Dewan, Khairul Anam and currently Lisa Ahmed Lisa as its general secretary. Some of the most critical

pillars for Chhayanaut have been the mentors who spent their lifetime training aspiring artists such as Ustad Moti Miah, Sheikh Luthfur Rahman, Sohrab Hossain, Zahedur Rahim, Anjali Rai, Ustad Phul Mohammad, Ustad Khurshid Khan, Ustad Modon Gopal Das, Md. Shahjahan and more.

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

One matter of pride, said Sanjida Khatun, is that Chhayanaut grew as an inspiration for the people and was in turn, built and funded entirely by the people. However, the struggle to build a permanent home for the school

went on for decades. It was only in 2005 that the school's organisers felt they had raised sufficient funds. On a piece of land presented by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, architect Bashirul Huque designed the building's blueprints and the school took shape.

Despite the peaceful nature of the school, it has been prone to deadly attacks. The most dreadful one was the 2001 bombing of the Pahela Baishakh programme that killed ten and injured hundreds. The Pahela Baishakh festivities had become an iconic Chhayanaut programme. It was one of the most symbolic gatherings of people who shared a common Bengali identity and an ideal target for terrorists who wanted to destroy it.

"The bomb blast threw us into a dilemma. 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," said Sanjida Khatun. However, 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.

"Young minds need to be informed about their culture through any means that can best reach them.

"Chhayanaut has grown over 56 years to be seen as the icon of traditional Bengali culture and a platform for ideas that can enlighten generations," said Sanjida Khatun.

Chhayanaut, true to its name, has grown from a seed into a protective tree. Under its shade it has nourished thousands of eager minds, linked millions of people and given a voice to the culture of a countless multitude. By the same virtue, the school has drawn strength from the people, channeling energy and enthusiasm into giving shape to its higher aspirations. Fifty years of Borshoboron celebrations have gone by in the blink of an eye; one wishes that Chhayanaut leaves its mark for time eternal.

TV stars and their Pahela Baishakh

SHAH ALAM SHAZU

As Baishakh arrives on our doorsteps, the breeze of celebrations blow through the entire country and our celebrities are not out of its reach. Four prominent TV actors spoke to The Daily Star about their feelings of Baishakh, and their plans for this year. Excerpts:

Zahid Hasan

Baishakh is really an occasion for nostalgia. I look back at my early years, when we had great fun on the day at my hometown Sirajganj. Businessmen opened *hal khata* as per tradition. Putul nach (puppet show) was held at Baishakhi fair then. Mouth-watering sweetmeats like Roshogolla were brought to our home on the occasion of *hal khata*. We visited Baishakhi Mela (fair) and hung around with friends all day long.



These days, Pahela Baishakh celebration is a lot of showing-off. Although a grand celebration is held here, I don't get that childhood feeling or amusement in it. Apart from all of that, I take the country-wide Baishakh celebration positively. I will stay in Dhaka this time and celebrate it with my wife and children.

Bipasha Hayat

I love to spend time with my family at any festival, and if the day is Pahela Baishakh, it is celebrated with grandeur. Besides, we artists who can rarely meet each other on other days due to busy shooting schedule, get together at a special venue every year. I really enjoy this event. For me Baishakh is a festival that cuts across all barriers and builds harmony. I feel a special kind of spirit in myself on the occasion. There are arrangements for a wide range of sumptu-



ous bharta-bhaji and panta-ilish. Before the celebrations, I make sure to stock Hilsa at home. I wear saree on the day. My younger sister Natasha has already gifted me a saree from her boutique house this year. As a visual artist, I have big family of artists. Besides, I have another family belonging to the TV and film industry. It is great pleasure to celebrate the day with all.

Bonna Mirza

Like every year, I will celebrate Pahela Baishakh with grand fervour. The artistes' association and four other organisations are going to celebrate the day jointly for the first time and the event will go on from dawn to dusk. As I'm a member of the association, I have been very busy with the arrangement. To me, the celebration will become



unique this year. I will wear a saree specially designed by me. During childhood days, my mother arranged panta-ilish for Baishakh morning. It was originally a festival for farmers, but now the festival is for us all. We have to love our country and culture and become a pure Bangalee for all seasons.

Nawsheen Nahreen

I will celebrate the day this year differently. In the morning, we celebrate the day with 40 autistic children at Dhanmondi and hang out with them under the banner of Youth Bangla Cultural Forum. A painting competition has also been organised for them. Later, I will spend some time with my family. Afterwards, members of the TV and fraternity will get together at a fixed venue like every year. I wish you all a joyous Baishakh.



Children's Baishakhi fair begins at Fulki

PRANABESH CHAKRABORTY, Chittagong

Like previous years, through colourful arrangements, a three-day children's Baishakhi fair titled "Chhotoder Baishakhi Mela" opened at Fulki premises in the port city on Wednesday evening.

With an aim to spread Bangalee culture among the young minds, Fulki, an alternative educational institute in Chittagong, organised the fair featuring solo and group performances like folk, local and traditional songs, dances and recitations from famous poets and showcasing creative works of kids.

Popular writer and journalist Anisul Hoque inaugurated the fair as the chief guest. Fulki Principal Shila Momen and poet Abul Momen also addressed the programme.

On the occasion, little kids, students of Fulki and guardians assembled at Fulki premises since afternoon. Several stalls named

"Khela Mela", Kutum Katam", "Boi Mela" were also installed at the premises to showcase different creative works, paintings, handicrafts, toys and innovations of kids.

Anisul Hoque in his inaugural speech said the forces of darkness try to drive out light. It is not possible to fight the force through sword. Through only kindling light, it is possible to fight darkness.

"If we involve ourselves in reading books, playing and practicing culture, then the whole country would be filled up with light", said Anisul Hoque. "If adolescent and young minds wake up, Bangladesh will wake up," he added.

Poet Abul Momen said, "We all have to congregate irrespective of creed, cast and religion in the days of festivals to fight evil forces."

Fulki Principal Shila Momen in her speech expressed her gratitude to all kids, guests and guardians for participating at the festival and

fair. The first segment of the inaugural programme started with a choral rendition of Rabindranath Tagore's song "Tumi Je Surer Agun Lagiye Dile" by the students of Sonartari, a cultural school of Fulki. Later, students from "Bishmoy", "Ananda", "Mugdha" and "Srishti" presented several choral songs ranging Narul, Rabindra and folk.

The little ones successively performed the songs "Shukno Patar Nurpur Paye" from Nazrul, a Khayal in Raga Bageshri, "Monjuri o Monjuri" and "Amar Pothe Pothe".

The group dance performance with the song "Dhitang Dhitang Bole" enchanted the audience.

The first segment of the inaugural programme ended with the choral rendition "Esho Hey Baishakh".

Fulki teacher Zinat Islam emceed the programme.

Chhayanaut: A bulwark of culture

ROBINA RASHID BHUIYAN

The red-bricked façade with its parapets grazing against the sky on Satmasjid road stands like a fortress that has remained unyielding through time. And indeed history has been a testament to Chhayanaut as a bastion of culture as it triumphed through the Liberation War, and continues stronger than ever today.

Today marks 50 years of the Borshoboron programme ushering in the Bangla New Year at Ramna Botumul, which Chhayanaut initiated in a bold move against an oppressive West Pakistan rule since 1967.

To commemorate their momentous journey, Chhayanaut has been holding month-long programmes, including a photo exhibition at the institute premises depicting Borshoboron at Ramna Botumul over the years. However, these are not artistic shots of the event; the organisation features their resilience through documentation. The wooden banisters of the landing on each floor were adorned with news archives of the celebrations over the years, including the tragic incident of 2001 when bomb blasts at Ramna Botumul took away precious lives on the programme day. However, as depicted in the photos, Chhayanaut is ever stalwart to



Laisa Ahmed Lisa

their cause by fighting forward with the continuation of the festival in the following years.

Laisa Ahmed Lisa, general secretary of the institution stated, "At Chhayanaut we work with unity, and all decisions are made unanimously. We do our utmost to preserve tradition and culture by ensuring practices will go on as they have always been. We look forward to the cooperation and love from the people in order to fulfill our goals."

In our ever changing society, constancy in tradition and culture are what remains in evidence of our roots. As described by Khairul



Khairul Anam Shakil

Anam Shakil, vice president of the institution: "Cultural identity is passed down through generations through word of mouth, which we hold on to dearly. If the future generations do not have avenues to understand Bangla art and culture in its authentic and true form, then a vital part to our understanding of history and self-identity will be lost. It is essential to shoulder the responsibility of ensuring this is carried on as it has always been for thousands of years. The true identity to any country is culture, and every citizen is its representative."