

SPOTLIGHT



FOLKLORIC BANGLADESH

Bangla folk literature has always celebrated a rich tapestry of themes, from heroic religious narratives depicted in ballads and dramas, to the mundane struggles of life reflected in witty proverbs and riddles. These folk tales, many of which have been passed down through generations orally, reflect the diversity of our different ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. This Pahela Baishakh, we invite you on a journey that takes us back to our roots.

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN, UPASHANA SALAM AND FAYEKA ZABEEN SIDDIQUA

A profound mystical ride

When it comes to oral folk traditions of our country, you never know when or how a simple story can draw out feelings of devotion and spirituality in people of different beliefs. Whether you call him Satya Pir or Satya Narayan, his is the myth that transcends religious confines, resting instead on a universal mysticism that is the same for all – Hindu or Muslim.

King Mandan's virgin daughter, Satyabati, once took a dip in the river when she saw a flower floating. As she smelled the flower, she became pregnant. Her furious parents drove her away from home. While Satyabati was pregnant, the queen goddess Hanila built a palace for her where she could give birth. Unfortunately, Satyabati gave birth to a ball of bloody flesh that she threw into the river which was instantly swallowed by a female tortoise. The tortoise gave birth to a baby, named it Satya Pir, and died right after the birth. The newborn was found and brought up by a Brahmin Purohit called Kusaleswar. One day while walking by the river, Satya Pir found a manuscript of the holy Quran which he brought back to the priest. While going through the manuscript, Satya Pir understood that there was no distinct difference between a Purana and Islamic verses, as he argued that both

spoke of harmony and peace. (Lidia Guzy, "Marginalised Music: Music, Religion and Politics from Western Odisha/India")

This is how Satya Pir palas came into being, bringing together devotees of both Islam and Hinduism to the shores of the Sundarbans and the lands of Panchagarh and Dinajpur. These events have a two-fold message. One is to encourage religious tolerance and interfaith harmony. The other is to assuage people's belief that any problem can be overcome with the blessing of Satya Pir/Satya Narayan.

During the performances, Hindu believers worship the Hindu God Satya Narayan and Muslim believers, on the other hand, pay their respect to Satya Pir. Both the performers and the devotees consider these two entities as a single divine power, thus they use the name Satya Narayan and Satya Pir interchangeably.

A flow of religious incantations through rhythms, coupled with songs, ballads, dance and dialogues—done in an aesthetic, spiritual manner—that's what a Satya Pir pala looks like. Clad in colourful sarees, the performers tend to captivate their audience through humorous and entertaining narratives, all delivered in local dialects.

The performance starts with a melodic, recitative invocation of the Hindu God Satya Narayan, and is

followed by the stories of the incarnation of Satya Pir. It also includes recitation of Hindu epics and narratives from Puranas and stories from the Quran. The group moves in a slow circle, dancing to the rhythm of their songs. Towards the end of the performance, the tempo deescalates and the dance slowly comes to a stop. People then hand over their offerings and offer their prayers.

It is believed that back in the 17th

century, under the Mughal regime, the cult of Satya Pir became popular in rural Odisha. This tradition evolved down the course of history and gave birth to many other oral folk literature that glorify the presence of Satya Pir and Satya Narayan in devotees' lives—to make their dream come true or help them overcome any trouble, especially any hindrance in childbirth.



Artworks on the walls of Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Dhaka.

Such tales of tolerance and acceptance depicted through these palas have formed our social fabric, and this is something that distinguishes Satyanarayan palas from any other musical performances.

The songs of our soul

In 1923, two Bengali scholars travelled to the remotest parts of East Bengal, a large part of which is still covered with gigantic wetlands. They explored every village of Kishoreganj, Netrokona and Durgapur area (that constitutes the current Mymensingh division) in search of one of the most ancient and forgotten treasures of Bengali folklore. These

were *geetikas* (the closest English equivalent would be ballads but *geetikas* are longer and more rhythmic) authored by village bards in medieval Bengal. Due to the tradition of oral recitation, these unwritten songs of Bengal's rural society were about to be lost in oblivion. When Dinesh launched the expedition, very few people in those districts could recall those ballads, which, once upon a time, were part and parcel of the village culture. After



PHOTOS: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

almost ten years of research, Dinesh Chandra Sen with his associate Chandra Kumer De, compiled ten ballads and published a book called *Maimansingha Geetika* in 1933.

These ballads reflect the societal values, struggles and triumphs of a medieval agrarian community whose lives and cultures were deeply rooted in the course of the mighty Brahmaputra River and the surrounding wetlands. The river nourished their fertile lands and ensured the community of a sustained production of food crops; on the other hand, the rivers and the wetlands isolated them from the rest of the Bengal for a long time which

allowed a rich, distinctive folk culture to flourish. This culture was so unique that the ballads, the best example of this culture, have been named after the region.

The ten ballads which have been compiled in *Maimansingha Geetika* are Mahuar Pala, Chandravatir Pala, Kamala, Dewan Bhabna, Doshyu Kenaramer Pala, Malua, Rupabati, Kobko O Leela, Kajalrekha and Dewan Madina. These ballads are written in a

formed with pure humanistic values whose symbol was the empowered women of the community. "In the ballads of Kajalrekha we can see the how a woman overcomes all her obstacles to save her loved one which reveals a society where women were perceived as the protectors and saviours. In the ballads of Mahuar Pala, we see a rich agricultural community where women play a vital role in preserving the crops and it also shows how men and women of Bengal's villages struggle together to overcome the calamities of annual floods and to fend off the pirates," says Dr Soumitra Sekhar, Professor, Department of Bangla, University of Dhaka.

"We read about the state of human rights and women's rights in foreign countries. But, if we study and explore our folk literatures like *Maimansingha Geetika* we find that these humanistic values were embedded in our own culture for a long time," adds Dr Sekhar.

However, these literary treasures of ours are hardly ever in the limelight except for occasions like Pahela Baishakh. When Dinesh Chandra Sen and Chandra Kumer De collected these ballads, there were no recording devices such as tape recorders or cameras. Now, with modern technology, new expeditions can be launched to rediscover these folk literatures from the villages of rural Bengal where traces of these lost treasures can still be found.

Of Wit and Wisdom

Rajai rajai juddho korey, ulukhagarar pran jai.

If you are a Bangladeshi, you've heard this adage before. While it may sound complicated, (a bit of a tongue twister, really) the meaning of this proverb is very simple and aptly topical. Meaning "ordinary folks suffer when powerful rivals fight each other." It is an age-old maxim that could easily be applied in today's world.

Bachans or proverbs are some of the earliest genres of folk creativity in this region. Of particular import are the *bachans* of the legendary poet, astrologer and soothsayer Khona who composed her sayings and poetry in the medieval Bangla language between the 9th and 12th centuries AD. The legend goes that Khona's father-in-law (some argue that it was her husband), who himself was a great astrologer, had her tongue cut when he realised that Khona's prophecies were more accurate than his ones. Despite his attempts to subdue her voice, Khona's sayings and adages have survived the passage of time, reaching people from all around the subcontinent, including Nepal, Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal, Tripura, Sri Lanka, South India and Gujrat.

As we celebrate Pahela Baishakh all over the country today, it is interesting to recall that the development of the Bangla calendar was initially planned for relatively easier tax collection that could coincide with harvest seasons, making it easier for farmers to pay their

taxes on time. Incidentally, a significant portion of Khona's *bachans* are related to agriculture and livestock rearing. While at first reading, these sayings might seem to be directed only toward farmers, her *bachans* that are laden with meaning are applicable for every person from every generation.

Chinish ban a chinish, khuje dekke goru kinish.

This adage, for example, gives a fair warning to farmers to be careful when buying their livestock, to check the animal's pedigree and actual worth instead of purchasing it simply on the basis of superficial appearance. This wise saying is also applicable to our lives, as Khona implies that one should be careful in choosing anything and not be swayed solely by appearances. She emphasised on the need to allocate the right person for the right job:

Gai diye bai hal, dukkho tar chiro kaal. Khona suggests that if the farmer uses his cow to till his lands, instead of his bullock, he's bound to end up with poor crops. Similarly, when you appoint a person who is unsuitable for the job then you can't really complain about the end results.

Khona's sayings are not simply wise proverbs but provide a peek into the lives of people who lived ages ago. As her *bachans* often focused on agriculture and dairy farming, we understand that both were considered to be important professions of that era. Her *bachans* are still diligently followed by farmers in rural areas. She had spoken about the importance of bamboo in the daily lives of farmers, and even today, residents of rural areas follow her instructions in the plantation and use of plants like bamboo.

Khona was probably one of the first people to understand the importance and effect of weather on crops. She wrote that when there's a lot of thunder, there's usually no rain. She also drew parallel conclusions between the production of certain fruits and possible future weather events. If in one year there is a bumper crop of mangoes, tamarind and jackfruit, she says, there's a chance of possible floods that year. Furthermore, she would observe the activities of insects and animals in predicting weather patterns. You might have heard of the saying that when a frog uncharacteristically calls loudly, there is a strong possibility of rain. Even at that age, Khona based her predictions on nature and science instead of going by heresy and myths.

Farmers all over the country, particularly Comilla, Mymensingh and Dinajpur still follow her instructions regarding when to plant paddy, and how much water should be used. In one of her sayings, Khona argues that rain in the month of Aghrayan is terrible for crops, thus leading to a possibility of famine. While keeping with the mindset of people in that era, Khona phrases her sayings in relatable couplets that don't disguise her observational skills that she used in her "predictions." ■