

SPOTLIGHT

Those were the lean years, for Minu and her big family full of brothers and sisters. Post-war Bangladesh was still finding its way in the global political scene. Far, far away from the big city, Minu was growing up in a tiny village nestled by the vast Kalenga forest. It was 1978.

Young Minu's days started by going to the mosque to learn reciting the Quran in the mornings after a cup of raw tea, then rushing back home, gulping down another cup of tea, this time with toasted rice crushed to a powder and heading over to school. Evenings would be spent running through the rice fields, playing hide and seek with friends and trying to watch TV through the open window of someone else's house.

Their village was a quiet one, in the rural extremes of the country, still untamed by pitch roads. The quiet of the village was sometimes broken by festivities centering around birth, marriage and death. In all three cases, the celebrations were limited to one community or the other. But Baishakhi mela was different, it brought everyone together irrespective of religion or social class, it was about welcoming the New Year.

To Minu's little eyes, it was a monumental affair, a week-long bonanza. Minu, and her siblings, would walk the dusty path to the Baishakhi mela of her village, which was held on the rice field, empty after the Aman harvest.

From the mela, Minu would purchase many things—utensils, farming tools, *muri* (puffed rice), *murki* (sweetmeats), saree, bangles, clay toys and so on.

A school of historians credit King Shoshangko of Gour with starting the Bangali era. According to Joynal Abedin Khan, it is widely believed that to make tax payments convenient for the farmers, King Akbar introduced Tarikh E Elahi. On his order, two of his officials Fatullah Shirazi and Abul Fazal revised and developed the Bangali calendar. Pahela Baishakh was made the first day of the New Year or Noboborsho.

On New Year's Eve (Chaitra Shonkranti), the last day of the month of Chaitra, businesses clear their debts. Noboborsho is welcomed on a clean slate or Halkhata.

The farmers of Bengal found this calendar convenient as it was the time when they harvested a rich yield of paddy. Till then it was limited to the mundane rituals of farming, harvesting and husking.

"The entire concept of a Bengali calendar was based on harvesting rice and then paying taxes, which means the agrarian culture is directly tied to Noboborsho celebrations," says Dr Tapan Bagchi, poet and folklorist, Deputy Director (Research) of Bangla Academy.

The more modern celebrations of Pahela Baishakh started taking shape after the partition of the Indian

subcontinent in 1947. In many ways, the cultural significance of Pahela Baishakh started to resurface when Pakistani rulers began to demean Bangali tradition by imposing Urdu and West Pakistani culture.

In 1965, Chhayanaught, the renowned cultural organisation, started to organise a cultural programme at Ramna Park at the dawn of the first day of Bangali New Year. This was to be the first of many, and brought the festival to the city centre.

The agrarian festival found a new meaning among the emerging and fast growing urban middle class of Dhaka. Here the somewhat prolonged rural celebrations were condensed to one single day. In this urban space, a predominantly cosmopolitan way of celebrating the Noboborsho was coming into shape.

Fast forward to the present. 22-year-old Meem eagerly looks forward to the Pahela Baishakh celebrations which is now a day-long affair. It is a public holiday and festivities start early in the morning at the Ramna Batamul, the air punctuated

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with the melodious Rabindra Sangeet and the smell of fried fish and *shutki bhorta*. She is usually there first thing in the morning in her new sari, the "official" dress code of the day.

Pahela Baishakh celebrations in Dhaka are a pompous affair, and Meem loves every bit of the merriments. Her day begins with the Chhayanaught programme at Ramna Batamul, then the Mongol Shobhajatra.

From there she will be off for a lunch of *panta bhaat* and *ilish* in one of the more fine-dining restaurants of the city. In the evenings she will visit the many concerts all over the city usually sponsored by multinational companies.

All pit-stops on the day of Pahela Baishakh will, of course, be documented on her Snapchat and the day will end with uploading a Facebook album full of 'selfies' with her and her friends.

In its journey from the rural to urban landscape Pahela Baishakh celebrations have changed and much like Meem, whose face resembles very little of her grandmother Minu, it has become a distant reminder of how it used to be. There is a frenzy of activity as you crisscross the city. It is a carnival of mad colours as the fledgling urban people, takes a renewed interest in "culture". It is this one day of the year where the people of Dhaka detach themselves



PHOTO: MD HUZZATUL MURSALIN

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We have become the passive consumers of a mass produced "culture".

PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ AFURRO

A CHANGING NOBOBORSHO

FROM HALKHATA TO BALANCE SHEET, FROM MELA TO CARNIVAL

from their individual identities and participate in an enactment of their 'Bengaliness'.

"The Pahela Baishakh celebrations in Dhaka should not be denigrated completely. It brings together people and a revolutionary act happens on this day. People of all classes, irrespective of their religion are out on the streets. It is reclamation of public space by the ordinary people, a lack of which I have felt acutely in Bangladesh," says Tauhid Bin Kashem, Lecturer of the Political Science Department at North South University.

But even in this reclamation, there lies a stark difference in the rural celebrations of yesteryears and the urban celebrations of today. Whereas before the public spaces were an open for all affair (imagine the rural Baishakhi mela), the celebrations are now boxed and sealed off and tickets are required to enter. And even then it involves intense security checks before you get to catch a glimpse of something of interest happening.

In comparison to the sometimes weeklong affair in the rural areas, the duration of the celebration has also been reduced to a smaller chunk, fitting everything "culturally significant" into the span of a single delirious day. To the urban population of Dhaka this becomes a majestic occasion to seek joy. The day is a remedy to the grind, monotony and struggles of this city.

"If the celebrations are lengthened, we possibly become more intimate with

it instead of making it into a spectacle or display," says Tauhid Bin Kashem.

The celebrations in Dhaka now remain confined to the domain of clothing, rudimentary exhibitionism bereft of any meaningful inquiries into history and tradition.

However, perhaps the most visible aspect of the Noboborsho celebrations lies in how it has been corporatised and commercialised. The economics of merriment have shifted-while it once celebrated producers, in the urban setting the celebrations are more consumer-oriented.

Noboborsho has always been a business affair. In the past, customers would clear debts on the last day of the year—Chaitra Shankranti—and open a new ledger or Halkhata. Often red in colour, the Halkhata is a simple ledger book. But it is a unique representation of our tradition, with festivities and rituals surrounding it. Now, on the Gregorian calendar, the Halkhata has become more of a symbolic practice that only some businesses have held on to.

In the new and hip Dhaka, Noboborsho is a time for mega offers and unique marketing sprees. Fashion houses offer discounts on their latest clothing line, telecom companies air ads flaunting their 'Bengaliness' and restaurants come up with the most bizarre dining options.

Corporate giants in a perfect marriage with globalisation have also managed to change the composition of the products showcased in Boishakhi



PHOTO: ZAHIDUL I KHAN

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melas. Where once it was the local artisans who dominated the scene using all sorts of local materials, now it appears as though plastic—literally the most global of products—has managed to take over. Clay toys and *talpatar pakha* has been replaced with plastic toys and paper and plastic fans often with company logos on them, the *shanaai* and bamboo flutes are replaced by vuvuzelas.

Pahela Baishakh celebrated local artisans, travelling artistes, circus troupes, traders, and entertainers. However, now it has become about multinational corporations and we have become the passive consumers of a mass produced "culture".

And try as you might, you cannot escape this "push-media". The telecom companies bombard you with SMSs announcing one discount or another new offer. Need a new hairdo to complete your Pahela Baishakh ensemble? Look no further, your favourite salon has a 15 percent

discount for you. The summer heat bringing you down? Then why not buy an AC, this too with a special Pahela Baishakh offer. Or does your heart desire a sumptuous meal, then why not go for some *panta bhaat* and *ilish* in one of the fine-dining restaurants of Dhaka?

We have come to terms with these times of hyper-globalisation as an inevitable phenomenon. But it is important to retain at least some rootedness to our cultural values. "This rootedness instils in us a sense of responsibility to our community and traditions," says Tauhid Bin Kashem.

Noboborsho has become a veritable symbol of Bengali culture and how we appear to the outside world. It has become our brand, and surely then, there should be efforts to integrate traditional sensibilities into the contemporary "Pahela Baishakh".

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