

Baishakhi Spirit, which art Moving Everywhere

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

My phone is bombarded with SMS alerts notifying me of various deals available for Baishakh: the discounts that are offered in various fashion outlets that will turn ethnic for the day; fancy eateries that promise to go native for a change; or international corporate organizations that are happy to let go off their profit margins in a patriotic gesture as they want us to celebrate our national culture. It is not the heat of Chaitra or the longing for Nor'wester that marks the advent of the Bengali New Year anymore. The nearing of the stormy season has become more of a viral phenomenon than a seasonal one. There is a concerted corporate conspiracy that will 'season shame' (If I may suborn) you, if you fail to join the Baishakhi bandwagon.

Things were so different when I was growing up. The Baishakhi fever was not as ardent as it is today. I had to go to a bookstore to get my copy of *Anandamela* to know that Baishakh was in the air. Baishakh meant Ferdousi Rahman teaching kids at *Esho Gaan Shikhi*: "Jhor elo, elo jhor, aam por, aam por, tok tok mishit, ei ja elo bujhi brishti...". or BTV presenting a dance drama on "Oi nutoner Keton urey, kal baishakhi jhor". Baishakh meant converting art papers into wall magazines by a group of novice enthusiasts at school or *mahalla* who had just started using fountain pens and could not even maintain straight lines while writing. Baishakh was a single column news item, a captioned photograph of Ramna Batumul and a routine editorial harping on the importance of cultural heritage.

Baishakh for the business houses, on the other hand, simply meant updating the ledger account over sweet-meat. I have fond memory of going to a goldsmith with my parents on one such occasion. My mother was looking for a specific design, and the salesman at the jewelry shop at Baitul Mukarram told us it would be better if she explained the details to the smith in person. So, we ended up going to Sutrapur on a Pahela Baishakh day. It was a shabby looking shop where the smith was using a pair of bellows and a small hammer to give shape to softened gold under a magnifying glass. As my mother briefed the artisan, a plate of 'Mansur' arrived along with Crush Cola. It was my first brush with the edible sponge bob made of sugar. Baishakh on that day left a sweet touch in me that I still relish.

As already mentioned,

Baishakh has been nothing more than year-ending closing of financial accounts, a sweet ploy of businessmen to make sure that old dues are paid off and a revised, updated book of accounts (*haal-khata*) is put in order. In a very subtle way, it follows the same tradition of Punyaho, 'a day for ceremonial land tax collection,' initiated by a Mughal governor in Bengal Nawab Murshid Quli Khan. According to Shamsuzzman Khan, Quli synchronized Emperor Akbar's fiscal policy with Bangla calendar to make a festival out of a tax extraction process. The recent culture of tax fair promoted by NBR has therefore a

But then again you cannot keep Bengali away from politics (if in doubt, ask those involved with 1/11). During the colonial era, according to Professor Serajul Islam Chowdhury, the celebration of Pahela Baishakh was seen as a celebration that counters the British celebration of New Year's Eve. In Post-Partition East Pakistan, Chhayanat emerged as a cultural hub in 1961 in its effort to counter Islamicization of Bengali culture. The initiative began with the celebration of Tagore's birth centenary and it soon morphed into a musical school in 1963. Guess what, the school was established on the first day of

the 1st day of the month of Baisakh (usually on 13th or 14th of April), when farmers thank God for the good harvest and pray for their prosperity. It is also known for being the foundation day of Khalsa Pant (a warrior group) by the tenth Sikh guru— Guru Gobind Singh in the year 1699. In Thailand, they observe the Shongkran, the seasonal transformation leading up to the New Year. Borrowed from Sanskrit, Shongkran involves the astronomical passage when the Sun enters the Aries according to their zodiac system. The celebrations are essentially Buddhist in orientation as devotees are concerned with 'merit making' by going to the

participation of the mass it has deftly stayed away from party line. The ritualized pageantry known as *Mongol Shovajatra* was adopted by Fine Arts Institute in 1989 at the height of anti-autocratic movement. While there has been criticism over the import of masks that are distantly related to our indigenous culture or the Mach3 presence of vuvuzela, the lively and spontaneous participation of the thousands— who dress up in red and white, wear floral motifs and body paints, and in the parade— makes *Mongol Shovajatra* an integral part of the overall Baishakhi celebration. No wonder, the procession was recognized as a UNESCO intangible cultural heritage for humanity in 2017.

Every year something new is being added to this festive frenzy. New spots outside the traditional loci are becoming popular. Shurer Dhara is a recent case in point. Even the shangkran, observed in Old Dhaka, preceding the New Year has been secularized and presented as a part of the Baishakhi celebration. The celebration is thereby gathering steam. But its real power lies with the people. It shows that their economic condition is changing and there is a hunger for pleasure. The expansion of the middle class has created a new market for festivity. Baishakh thus offers a carnivalesque moment in which life escapes its official furrows and enacts a type of freedom. It is a day when life is lived as festive. The utopian vision of being at one with essential Bengaliness is an ideal that seems real through the performative display of Baishakh. The celebration eliminates barriers among people created by hierarchies, replacing it with a vision of mutual cooperation and equality. Those who participate in the Baishakhi celebration form a kind of lived collective body which is constantly renewed. The celebration that once started with a trickle of educated middle class has now become a carnival of the mass. Baishakh is a wild spirit, which like Shelley's West Wind, is moving everywhere. One can only hope, repeating Tagore, "Let whatever shakable shake; let anything transient go! / Let everything fragile shatter; let only the permanent stay!" (translated by Fakrul Alam)

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strong legacy. The Mughals came up with the idea of the Tarikh-e-Elahi in 1585 (also known known as *Fasholi shan* or *shon* --harvest calendar) as the peasants were not in a position to pay taxes based on Islamic calendar which did not correspond with their harvesting pattern. Akbar commissioned his royal astronomer Fathullah Shirazi to create a new calendar by combining the lunar Islamic calendar and solar Hindu calendar. The adoption of a Bengali calendar has a pecuniary agenda, and my SMSs are tracing a tradition that is at least 1425 years old.

Baishakh, storming into the political scene fluttering the flag of the new. The celebration of Pahela Baishakh soon became a political statement, a cultural stance in a region that was in search of its national identity that is not subsumed under religion. Initially, it attracted the educated middle class of the Capital. The mass in general did not warm up to the cultural side as it was to that of the agricultural one.

In fact, Baishakhi is common to all areas touched by the monsoon wind. In North India, particularly in Punjab and Haryana, Baisakhi is the most significant harvest festival. It falls on

temple and doing good deeds. The water sports, one of the highlights of the day, forms a tradition that is practiced by our people in the hill tracts as well as people in Laos and Cambodia. Isn't it a wonder how the Monsoon affects different parts of the region yielding different results?

In our culture, Baishakh is inevitably linked with the Nor'wester. It has the indomitable might to change by destroying anything that is old. It follows its own course and shapes its own destiny. Over the years there has been attempts to politicise Baishakh as a cultural marker, but with the

A Brief History of Pahela Baishakh

Most of us know that the celebrations of Pahela Baishakh began in the reign of the Mughal Emperor Akbar. However, we have mostly forgotten the reasons behind Akbar's interest in inventing a new year. In those days, agricultural taxes were collected according to the *Hijri* Calendar. But then the *Hijri* calendar is a lunar calendar and naturally, it did not coincide with the agricultural year. It only added to the confusion of the peasants and farmers. To streamline the tax collection, Akbar ordered a reformation of the calendar. As a result, in 1584 *Bangabda* was born. But the year started from 963, the *Hijri* year it was modeled on.

Back then, the most important activities on the first day of the year involved *halakhata*, opening of a new book for zamindars who would treat their tenants with sweets. On the last day of the old year, there would be *Chaitra Shangkranti*, a fair where everybody would participate. In today's Bangladeshi scenario, *Chaitra Shangkranti* has almost disappeared except in some distant villages. Chhayanaut started celebrating the Bengali Nababarsha at Ramna Botomul in 1967. Since the liberation, Pahela Baishakh has become a national festival for all Bangladeshis irrespective of all religions and castes.

An interesting aspect of *Bangabda* is that the names of the months were different in those times. The story how *Farwardin*, *Urdibahish* and *Khordad* became *Baishakh*, *Jyosthyha* and *Ashar* is lost to us. But we do know that just as he had helped in modernizing the Bengali language, Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah also helped in modernizing the Bengali year. Partially accepting his reformative suggestions, the Bangla Academy saw that the first six months had thirty-one days each and the last six, thirty. Hence there is no further confusion about which day of the Gregorian calendar it coincides with. In Bangladesh, it is always 14 April.

The Star Literature Team

Alpanas: "Dreams under your feet"

NISHAT ATIYA SHOILEE

If you ask me, it is not unlikely that *alpana* and *kalpana* should sound almost similar, since without *kalpana*, or creative ingenuity, it is nearly impossible for one to put forward the beautiful and vibrant designs we see on the flat surface of an open street, or house-floor during significant Bengali festivals, like Pahela Baishakh itself. The bright and colorful celebration of Bengali *Nababarsha* cannot be fully realized without this original form of illustration, one of the most popular modes of artistic expressions in Bengali heritage.

Derived from the Sanskrit word, "Alimpana," the very word has its origin deeply rooted in ancient agricultural rituals. The ultimate aesthetic sense of the *alpana* patterns, however, still serves the same purpose, which is to dispel the evil from the beginning of something new, be it a wedding or a new year. Usually drawn with the help of rice-powder/paste, powdered colors or charcoal, *alpana* designs vary from occasion to occasion in different parts of the world. Despite its age-old involvement in traditional folk art, the idea of *alpana* painting has always been innovative and well-timed. Sometimes, it has acted as a protective shield for the free voices as well.

Previously taken as a form of art practiced by rural women in specific, the present time, however, has seen a considerable change of attitude where it has become a powerful symbol for the spirit of the nation. A prompt example could be the 2012 effort of the Fine Arts students when along with people of all walks of life, they spent an entire night painting a 350,000 square feet *alpana* (the largest one in the world) on both sides of the Manik Mia

Avenue, representing the folk culture of Bangladesh. An effective endeavor to promote the national artistic sensibility, one cannot deny.

Here, I cannot help recalling one of my personal experiences. Due to its extensive international media coverage, this event got itself into the limelight for many non-native viewers. A certain juvenile friend of mine from Calgary, who hardly knew anything about Bangladesh or its cultural context, expressed his wonder at this "colossal" of a "street-graffiti" attempt. He asked whether or not these hand-painted motifs are subjected to "criminal" liability since expressing your ideas freely in a creative fashion, like any other open-street initiative, can be, at times, "risky." I laughed at that moment and tried to explain the situation. But now that I think of the homologous words, "motifs" and "motives," the close connection between Pahela Baishakh and breaking the chains to attain one's creative freedom becomes apparent again. Behind the *alpana* patterns, likewise, lies the same inspiration, where in order to celebrate the new, you have to bring out the "new" within as well, each stroke of your paint-brush giving birth to a new hope.

Well, with a new Sun to rise in the east today, why not then "coat" your life with new colors, why not let yourself see the beauty that you refused to see in the year bygone? Who knows what many-hued wonders might hide on the other side? "Tread softly," then, as Yeats would say!

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