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Emergence of Bengali New Year and Calender

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As an old saying goes: "Bengalis have thirteen festivals in twelve months." This experience-based adage gives an impression of a society which was affluent, cohesive and joyful. It further reveals that the society of olden Bengal had been featured by an intense cultural atmosphere and resulting social euphoria.

The above saying actually holds true about Hindu Bengalis. So far as culture is concerned, Bengali Muslim life in Bengal had differed substantially from that of their Hindu neighbours. Bengali Muslims, had, in fact, no ethnic, indigenous or locally originated (except for a few legends, or cult-based quasi-religious events) national, regional or group-centred secular cultural festivals. All their broad-based, community-oriented and family-centred festivals were religious or semi-religious in nature. As for example, two Eid festivals and celebration of tragic Karbala episode of Islamic history (Muharram) had been narrated by *Morshia* singers and *Jari* narrative performers. Another important feature of Karbala episode had also been performed by *Puthials*

(Performers those who narrate the Karbala episode in a very stylistic manner and impressive tune and rhythmic voice). This is how the Muslims of Bengal had created a culture-basis for their artistic expressions. It is important to note that the Bengali Hindus had also a cultural setting of *Puthi* literature. Their *Puthis* centred round Hindu mythologies and portions of grand narratives of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat*. The two thematic patterns of *Bangla Puthi* literature came closer to each other through the interaction of Hindu and Muslim *Puthi* researchers. It was perhaps the meeting point of cultural interaction of two communities. And slowly but definitely the same geographical setting and the socio-economic milieu of their habitat and religious beliefs produced an eclectic mindset. This is how a very significant metamorphosis occurred in Bengali society over the years. In this process, a synthetic and pluralistic cultural worldview developed in Bengali society. This development had been rightly termed by renowned political scientist and cultural analyst Badruddin Umar as the "Bengali Muslims' home-coming".

The language movement of 1952, had

in fact, played a decisive role in shaping and sharpening the Bengali identity of the emerging generations of forwarding looking Bengali Muslims. Besides, the shared tradition of Bengali Language and Literature had always been a perennial source of strengthening Bengali identity.

This new generation of Bengali nationalist Muslims was searching for some lively and solid component of their newly found secular nationalism. Bengali Era and the age-old tradition of *Pahela Baishakh* (first day of Bengali almanac's first month) celebrations in rural Bengal provided them with a strong basis for their new pursuit of cultural synthesis based on tolerance, pluralistic attitude and humanism. Bengali Era and its primordial celebrations helped them remodel and augment their new cultural aptitude.

Bangla San (calendar), recently used as *Bangabdha* by the elites is essentially a hybrid era. For this reason it is a common heritage of almost all sections of people of Bengal. Highly acclaimed scientist and Indian almanac reformer Dr Meghnad Saha, while identifying the genesis of Bengali Era said "After the introduction of *Tarik-i-Ilahi* (1556 AD) in the year of his

accession to the throne by Emperor Akbar, the people of Bengal began to use the *Surya Sidhanta* reckoning and the solar year. For calculating the *Bangla San*, we take Hijri year, elapsed in 1556 i.e. 963 and add to it the number of solar years." If we follow this rule the reckoning of the Bengali new year today would be $963+2014\text{ AD}-1556=1421$ *Bangla San*.

Dr Saha believed that the *Bangla San* derived from *Tarik-i-Ilahi* (1556 AD) of Emperor Akbar. And, it is an amalgam of Lunar year, Hijri and Indian solar year. Akbar's court astronomer Fatehullah Shirajee introduced this hybrid reckoning system. Bengali Nobel laureate Professor Amartya Sen's comment in this regard is amusing. He wrote, "When a Bengali Hindu does his religious ceremonies according to the local calendar, he may not be fully aware that the dates invoked in his Hindu practice is attuned to commemorating Mohammad's flight from Mecca to Madina, albeit in a mixed lunar -- solar representation (An Assessment of the Millennium -- address, 20th August 1998 -- New Delhi). In one of my earlier interviews in the Daily Star I expressed a

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5