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different genesis of Bengali New Year and its calendar. I said, "The history of Bengali New Year and calendar is somehow unclear and it is difficult to say exactly when it came about, but some assumptions can be made based on circumstantial evidence. The fact that, it is called *Bangla San* or *Sal*, which are Arabic and Persian words respectively, suggests that it was introduced by a Muslim Kings or Sultans. Some historians suggest Mughal Emperor Akbar, as he had reformed the Indian calendar - with the help of his astronomer Fatehullah Shirajee - in line with the Iranian *Nouroj* or new day. Others suggest it was the seventh century king Sasanka.

I personally believe it was Nawab Murshid Kuli Khan who was earlier a Subedar or Mughal Governor and later a Nawab, who celebrated Bengali traditions such as the *Punyaha*, a day for ceremonial land-tax collection. I believe he used Akbar's New Year framework, revenue reforms and fiscal policy and started the *Bangla Calendar*."

However, *Bangla San* is a manifestation of engaging cultural integration. In fact, the Bengali culture is a mixed culture and it encompasses the elements of many civilizations, races and religions.

The deltaic civilization of Bengal is based on agricultural economy. Agrarian milieu produces many rituals and indigenous practices, rituals - even the primordial ones, are abundantly found in rural Bengal. Some of the surviving rituals and local cults had nicely been integrated with the later modern construction, namely the present day *Bangla Navabarsa Utsab* (Bengali New Year's festival). These primordial agriculture-related rituals include, 'Amani' and many other minor local practices. 'Amani' is a domestic ritual performed on the first day of the Bengali New Year's morning by individual agricultural families for the well-being of the family members and good harvest throughout the year.

Gamvira is also a local cultural event found mainly in Maldah and Chapai Nawabgonj districts of India and Bangladesh respectively. It is composed of dramatic movements, and social problem-oriented dialogue between the two main performers and along with folk song and dance. Outwardly, a humorous folk art form Gamvira is an event of contemporary social criticism. This folkloric genre has thrived in new born Bangladesh state. A regional folk performance of Chapai Nawabgonj and adjacent areas is now performed in different parts of Bangladesh. It is also a very favorite event of television shows and radio broadcasts.

Another local event of Baishakh is *Bali Khela*. It is a wrestlers' game. This Baishakhhi festival-game was introduced by Abdul Jabbar, a champion *Bali* of Chittagong during the early years of last century. Jabbar's *Bali Khela* is still very popular and held every year at Laldighi Maidan, Chittagong on 12th Baishakh.

Another regional event of Baishakh was Cattle Race. Munshiganj and Manikgonj were famous for this colourful fiesta. Netrakona and Brahmanbaria were well-known for bull fight and cock fight respectively.

Some of these regional events are now

extinct or on the verge of extinction.

Let us now look at the bigger Baishakhhi festive occasions. These are *Punyaha*, *Halkhata* and *Mela*. *Punyaha* denotes 'a sacred day'. The zamindars of Bengal observed this day during the month of Baishakh to collect land-tax from their subjects. There were much pomp and grandeur at the zaminder's palace or *Kachari* (land-tax collection office). On this occasion zamindars gave audience to their subjects, exchanged greetings and entertained them with sweets, betel nuts

a requisite for business in Bangladesh. Our economy was totally agriculture-oriented, where cash sale was almost impossible because 80 percent of the population were village-dwellers and dependent on agriculture. For this reason they did not have channels of regular flow of cash money. They did grow jute and paddy and sell them to acquire cash money. With this seasonal cash money they bought their yearly clothes and other necessary items for the whole family. So purchasing daily necessities on credit was



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etc. Once a universal Baishakhhi festival, *Punyaha* is now extinct with the abolition of zamindari system.

It now exists only in Chittagong Hill Tracts. Tribal kings observe this occasion with much festivity and fanfare.

*Halkhata* was also a nation-wide celebration of Pahela Baishakh. Dr Muhammad Enamul Huq rightly observed that *Halkhata* is the opposite side of the coin, named *Punyaha*. Business communities of the country up to the level of village grocers arranged *Halkhata* event almost compulsorily. It was, in fact,

inevitable. That is why the *Halkhata* was so important. *Halkhata* is a suitable occasion for the consumers to clear their debts. It gives them pleasure, satisfaction and some sort of pride in the society. Business houses entertain their customers and patrons with sweets. They also decorate their shops with festoons and flowers.

After the independence of Bangladesh, our economy has grown more or less on a capitalist path and a large number of cash money-holding consumers have emerged. This situation reduces the importance of *Halkhata*.

From earliest times, the *Mela* (fair) was a main component of Baishakhhi observances. This component has now thrived qualitatively. It is believed that nearly three hundred fifty *Melas* are now organised in Bangladesh during the month of Baishakh. *Baishakhhi Mela* organised by the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) and Bangla Academy is spatially massive and temporally lengthy.

Bengali New Year celebrations have played a politically significant and culturally decisive role in Bangladesh. During the semi-colonial and cultural repressive Pakistani period, East Bengalis faced a stiff resistance in organising the Bengali New Year's day. In the face of this negative stance by the then central government, Bengali scholars and cultural activists put forward the argument that Bengali Era was introduced by Emperor Akbar and it was originally been taken from Iranian new year's festival *Nouroz*. So its Muslim origin is unquestionable. Pakistani rulers, particularly the military regime of Ayub Khan, did not pay any heed to these arguments. On the contrary, the autocratic regime imposed ban on Rabindra Sangeet (Tagore song) in 1967. This culturally repressive role of the then central Pakistani government infuriated the Bengalees. And it added a political dimension to cultural emancipation. During this year (1967) Chayanaut, a leading cultural organisation of the country, organised the Pahela Baishakhhi celebration at Ramna green. It was meticulously organised, neatly produced and attended by a modest-sized middle class audience. But this innovative performance helped enkindle a new spirit among the growing Bengali middle class. In fact, this initiative had sharpened the Bengali identity and added fuel to the growing Bengali nationalism.

After the emergence of Bangladesh, Chayanaut's Bengali New Year celebrations at Ramna Batamul have become phenomenal. These have been massive and ever increasing. It is in fact, a great historic festival and the only secular cultural festival of the country where all communities of the Bengali population participate. It is interesting to note that Bengali New Year's Day celebrations of olden times were rather small, localised and group-based folk events and observed only in idyllic rural surroundings. Now this tradition has changed. The present-day urban revival of the New Year's celebration is a case in point. The old rituals and local cultural symbolic components have had a rebirth and added a multi-dimensional significance. Its role of protests against religious fundamentalism and autocratic regimes is manifested significantly. The unique Nababarsha parade and its masks are a critique on social injustices and other ills of society. So, it has now been playing a very important role in shaping modern secular and cohesive Bengali society with its live connection with our roots.

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