

The secular spirit of Pahela Baishakh

A translated excerpt of Dr Muhammad Enamul Haque's article titled "Bangla Naboborsho ba Pahela Baishakh."

LET us think about the origin of the Bangla Naboborsho, how it evolved through the years and what the current status of this Naboborsho is. The way we celebrate our new year is quite different from the way other nations of the world celebrate it, which is only natural, given that different nations live in different geographical locations and environments.

The phrase "Bangla Naboborsho" (Bangla New Year) is synonymous with "Pahela Baishakh" (the first day of Baishakh) now. It took thousands of years for these two terms/phrases to become synonymous with each other. Naboborsho used to be celebrated as a seasonal festival in ancient societies whereas Pahela Baishakh used to be celebrated as an agricultural festival by the non-nomadic people. In ancient times when people followed a nomadic lifestyle, they used to celebrate seasonal festivals according to the change of seasons. When people invented agricultural science, they settled down. They started to live in one place permanently as they had to sow seeds and harvest at the right time of the year. They then learned that twelve months made one year. Basically, Baishakh, Jaishtha, etc., are lunar months.

What is notable here is that in different parts of the world the new year used to be celebrated in different seasons. In some places the new year would be celebrated in winter, while in other places it would be celebrated in spring or autumn, based on the importance of the season to that particular place. Moreover, small seasonal festivals would be held on a regular basis. It is easily understandable that the main seasonal festival of the Bengal region used to be celebrated in summer. And all over the world the main seasonal festivals of the year have turned into the new year festival. The same may have happened here. What I think is, in Bangladesh the havoc wreaked by the *Kalboishakhi* (nor'wester)



PHOTO: STAR

followed by the new creation of life in nature have compelled us to accept the dominance of summer in our life. If not, there would be religious influence on our new year celebrations as our country is inhabited by Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and many indigenous people. Nevertheless, we don't see any such influence on our new year festivals.

Some may say that the occasion of *halkhata* is influenced by religion. It has been observed that a religious *shostibachon* is usually written on top of the *halkhata*. While a Muslim businessman writes "Elahi Bharosa", a Hindu writes "Nomo Goneshay Nomo". Similarly, a Buddhist writes "Budhdhong Shorong Gochchhami...." while a Christian draws a crucifix. But that does not mean this occasion is influenced by any

religion. This *shostibachon* is only an expression of one's personal religious belief.

Although at present *halkhata* has become a business-related occasion, it was originally related to agriculture. In ancient times business was done based on a reciprocal relationship. A household head would keep some of his agricultural produce for his family's consumption and trade the rest with others. He would keep count by tying a knot in the rope, or by accumulating rocks. *Halkhata* is a derivative of this.

There was an occasion called *Punnah* which is not in practice nowadays. It was a lively event in which taxes would be collected and the *Zamindar* and his subjects would meet and exchange pleasantries. This occasion was entirely based on agriculture as there was no other way for the farmers to pay tax if

the harvest was not good. Needless to say, at the beginning the farmers would pay taxes with their produce, later it was done through the use of coins. No religious rituals were related to this occasion. Here I want to mention the Sanskrit word *bohubreehi* [the person who harvested *bohu* (much) *breehi* (paddy)]. The phrase *dhanner jamidar* can be mentioned here as well.

Another agriculture-based occasion was *gorur dour* (cow race), which is now extinct. On Pahela Baishakh or Bangla Naboborsho this race would be arranged in Munshiganj of Dhaka. There was no religious element in this event either. In southern India such an event still takes place.

The seasonal and agricultural festivals of the country have evolved into fairs of the new year. Agricultural products and handicrafts are sold in these fairs. It

should be noted here that although most of the fairs of the world are influenced by religions, religions have not yet had any influence on our fairs.

The *Gomveera*, held both in India's Maldaha and Pakistan's Rajshahi, is an exclusive occasion of the new year. Speaking about the origin and evolution of *Gomveera* Pundit Haridas Palit said that it is an evolved form of *Gajon of Shiva*. Because in these songs by addressing *bholo* (*Bholanath* is equal to *Shiva*), the singer depicts the stories of happiness and woes of the people. But one thing Mr Haridas didn't notice is that *Shiber Gajon* is held on the day of *Chaitra Shangkranti*, the last day of the Bangla month *Chaitra*, not in *Baishakh*. Neither did he say anything about whether the occasion of *Gomveera* takes place throughout the month of *Baishakh*.

The Muslims believe that *bholo* is not *Shiva* or *Bholanath*. According to them, *bholo* is the person who has forgotten and ignored all his responsibilities and thus brought misfortune to people. The Muslims say that *Gomveera* is *Saltamamir Gan*, which depicts the distresses of the bygone year and wishes of preventing such sad events in the future.

Bangla Naboborsho is an ancient tradition of this country. Through the festivals of Pahela Baishakh the people of this country have kept their tradition alive. Singing, dancing, drinking, etc., are the common features of any festival, be it ancient or new. Although in this modern age some features of this festival have changed, the basics of this festival remained the same. So the Bangla Naboborsho is a seasonal as well as an agricultural festival. But this festival is, in no way, related to any religion.

Translated by Naznin Tithi.

(Source: *Bangladesher Utsab: Nababarsha*, edited by Mobarak Hossain and Kutub Azad, published by Bangla Academy.)

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Bad news for women



NANCY Pelosi is the highest-ranking elected female politician in the history of the United States. Theresa May is only the second female British prime minister. Amal Clooney is a world-renowned human-rights lawyer. Serena Williams is arguably the greatest female athlete of all time.

All four are succeeding in environments where high-achieving women are the exception rather than the rule. Yet parts of the media have portrayed them in a way that suggests their achievements and abilities are secondary to their appearance, age, or association with other people, particularly the men in their lives.

Consider Pelosi, the Speaker of the US House of Representatives. On the day she was elected to serve another term in the post, *The New York Times* published a tweet accompanying an image of her: "Nancy Pelosi, wearing a hot pink dress, ascended to the marble dais in the center of the House chamber to accept the wooden gavel." The tweet was later deleted, with the *Times* calling it "poorly framed." But it spoke volumes about the sexism, whether implied or overt, that still exists at the heart of the media industry.

Theresa May has been one of Europe's leading female politicians for

most of the past decade. Yet the British media have long been fascinated by her love of fashion, devoting many a column inch and image to her sartorial choices and penchant for shoes, instead of focusing on her policy decisions. The subconscious effect of the messaging is to diminish May's role as a woman in a male-dominated world.

Clooney knows exactly what it feels like to be judged by association. In

August 2015, the Associated Press published a tweet that read: "Amal Clooney, actor's wife, representing Al-Jazeera journalist accused in Egypt of ties to

extremists." The tweet drew widespread criticism, and the AP later referred to her as a human-rights lawyer. But the episode underscored the media's obsession with "clickbait" and the need for more outlets to pause before publishing

pictures or words that reinforce outdated gender stereotypes.

Williams has won a record 23 Grand Slam singles titles, but some media outlets have perpetuated the sexism and racism she has faced from inside the old-fashioned, male-dominated tennis world. A media storm erupted last September after Williams lost the final of the US Open and accused tennis officials of treating her more harshly than men. The umpire had earlier penalised her for getting coaching signals from the stands, breaking her racket, and calling him a "thief."

Some of the subsequent media coverage reduced Williams to the trope of the angry black woman, and a cartoon of her outburst in the *Herald Sun* newspaper in Melbourne, Australia, sparked a furious backlash from critics who

deemed it racist and offensive. The newspaper defended the cartoon as satire and said its critics were being politically correct.

Billie Jean King, who helped pioneer the women's tennis tour, later thanked Williams via Twitter "for calling out this double standard," whereby women are often described as "hysterical" while men behaving the same way are "out-spoken." By continuing to use such terms, the media reinforce the message that women and girls should not strive for leadership positions, and must still overcome many barriers to achieve their potential in a man's world.

Although depressing, the media's portrayal of women is not surprising, given the gender imbalance in the industry. According to the Global Media Monitoring Project, which produces a quinquennial report on gender in the news, the representation of women in the media has changed little in the past two decades. Women still rarely occupy positions of power in newsrooms, and female journalists tend to cover less serious topics than their male counterparts. Furthermore, women are the subjects of fewer news stories, and female experts are outnumbered as sources by their male counterparts in nearly every field.

But it's not all doom and gloom. Over the past few years, some high-profile media outlets have acknowledged their failings and sought to fix systemic imbalances. Bloomberg and *The Wall Street Journal*, among others, are committed to increasing the num-

ber of women in leadership roles, as well as improving the conditions of female staff and editorial coverage of women.

Elsewhere, the Women's Media Center runs SheSource, an online database of female experts for journalists. Poland-based NewsMavens produces a weekly round-up of news chosen by women to counterbalance the media's prevailing male-dominated perspective, while France 24's *The 51%* is a weekly show that almost entirely features women and how they are reshaping the world.

But for every news outlet working to change the gender narrative, there are others that remain woefully sexist. We still have a long way to go until the media cover women in a balanced way and finally put hoary stereotypes to rest.

The media have a responsibility to reflect society not only as it is, but also as it should be. This means more reporting about women—particularly in male-dominated industries—and portraying them in the same light as the men they cover. Otherwise, these successful women will not be perceived as role models to emulate. After all, we can't be what we don't see.

Hannah Storm is outgoing Director of the International News Safety Institute and will soon take up the position of CEO of the Ethical Journalism Network.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	30 Volcano shape	8 Pig parts
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9 Sold for	34 Cougars	15 Salad bar choice
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13 Italian seaport	39 Blueprint data	22 Dorothy's dog
14 Hollers	40 Sking surface	23 Funny fellow
16 Pull gently	41 Towel word	24 Teapot parts
17 Fourth-down kick		25 Dorothy's pal
18 Sense of taste		26 At higher volume
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23 "Toy Story" character	3 Walk with pride	29 Dainty drinks
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26 Pet perch	5 Sty resident	33 Money
29 Faucet	6 First woman	35 In the past
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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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ERNEST HEMINGWAY

(July 21, 1899 – July 2, 1961)

AMERICAN JOURNALIST, NOVELIST AND SHORT-STORY WRITER

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