PAHELA BAISHAKH

SPECIAL

The Daily Star

DHAKA FRIDAY, APRIL 14, 2023
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Bedazzled by BENGAL

PHOTO: **SAZZAD IBNE SAYED**
MODEL: **TARIN**
STYLING: **SONIA YEASMIN ISHA**
MAKEUP: **PIYASH**

Editor's NOTE

Pahela Baishakh is a reminder of our rich culture and beauty and we welcome the Bengali New Year with celebrations of our tradition in all its magnificence and glory.

Stepping into the year 1430, we present to you our Pahela Baishakh special, where we focus on Bengali heritage from several different perspectives.

We talk about the splendour of our language by highlighting Bangla calligraphy as an art form. We explore the rich and diverse gastronomy, by providing a detailed culinary map of the plethora of delicious sweets found in Bangladesh, hence a region-wise bucket list for you to try out.

For those who love trends and fashion, we report on the graceful and colourful attires for the New Year, diving into the classic red-and-white and beyond. And for the curious, we take a journey through time to tell the many tales of Pahela Baishakh and how it has evolved.

In the middle of all the woes and challenges of the present time, Pahela Baishakh appears today as a reason to pause everything else for a while to be bedazzled by Bengal's rich culture and also as a beacon of hope that shall ignite in us the spirit to make a fresh new start, to open a new personal 'halkhata' of our lives which will be filled with joys and successes throughout the year.

Subho Nababarsha!

Mahfuz Anam
Editor and Publisher
The Daily Star

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Rich history and tradition of our SWEETS

As a nation, we find a way of sneaking food into every celebration and occasion, especially sweets, and we Bengalis have a palate as sweet as our language. The various sweets that we have fill our plates with colour and flavour just like the new year fills up our lives with hope and optimism.

FARIHA AMBER AND ASHIF AHMED RUDRO

Taking a sweet voyage across our country would unveil so many hidden gems within our culinary trove. Starting with the central hub, Dhaka is known for its rich cultural heritage and grandeur, and Dhaka's food resonates with this, especially the food of Old Dhaka where the Mughal influence remains.

The shahi jilapi is a true reflection of this. While others debate about mota or chikon jilapi being the best kind, shahi jilapi belongs to an entirely different league! But not all regal desserts belong to Dhaka, turns out amritti is actually from Barishal!

It is not only Dhaka's delicacies that have earned name and fame owing to its rich heritage, but so has Tangail, which is now synonymous with chomchom, credited to the legendary Porabari chomchom. Despite its unbeatable fame, many may argue that chomchom of other places also deserves equal attention, such as that of Kurigram, where the sweet is lighter in comparison to that of Tangail.

The case of sweets, or any food for that matter in Bangladesh, is such that it is difficult to neatly segment into one district. Our food preferences and availability have become so dispersed that there are sweets that are hard to fit in one place. Sandesh is one such with its varied types such as pera sandesh and jaggery sandesh, spread out among various districts.

But what is truly debatable is the case of roshgolla.

And in this case, the debate spreads beyond the border too! While some claim it hails from Chandpur and others say the Gopalganj variant tastes best, these soft, fluffy white balls of deliciousness, although they can also be dry and brown, may look harmless but stir up serious conversations and debates!

If you were to drop the pin in only one district that resembles roshmalai, which would it be? Undoubtedly Cumilla owing to the daily long queues outside Matri Bhandar, but a debate persists here as well. Some would argue it is too sweet for the tastebuds and that of Jamalpur or Brahmanbaria is more succulent to taste, or that the super-sized ones available at Jhalakathi are more preferred.

Some have simply changed the name of roshmalai entirely! Such is the case of roshmanjuri in Gaibandha, which is essentially roshmalai with a different name. But it is not only brands or shops that make a particular sweet famous in the region, it can be the area too – take Mahasthangarh katkati or chomchom of Shibganj for example.

The sweets of Bangladesh come in various shapes and sizes, and how can we leave out pitha from this discussion? From intricate nakshi pitha from Narshingdi to chunga and chechma pitha from the hilly regions or the variety existing in Noakhali and Barguna, pithas are our pride.

On the other hand, some sweets like batasha hold exclusivity. Ever wondered if this sweet is rare or diminishing in popularity? Turns out we see it lesser every day only because we are growing older! Batasha is a sweet exclusive to our colourful and lively fairs, thus, as we grow older and stop visiting these fairs, we tend to see these less too.

Living in a riverine country, the majestic rivers of Bangladesh have great influence over our lifestyle and food habits. While superficially this refers to having a diet rich with fish for most of the populace, have the mighty rivers grasped our dessert plate as well? Turns out they have!

It is said that hilsa of Madaripur is one of the best solely for being sourced from the Padma, and this vast popularity of hilsa has influenced the district's dessert choices, as locals came up with their own ilish mishti (also known as peti mishti), which is a sweet textured like a soft sandesh.

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Bangladesh has sweets aplenty and if all of them were to be listed and put into districts, it would become a never-ending one! This highly concise and classified map itself took a month to curate. Despite it all, these sweets can be bucket-list items to try out just as how we explore historical monuments and picturesque sites when we travel across the country.

So, how many have you tried from here?

Special thanks to Uday Shanker Biswas, Professor – Department of Folklore, University of Rajshahi, and Chef Subhabrata Maitra, Restaurateur and Culinary Instructor for the guidance and support to curate this map of Bangladeshi sweets.

ILLUSTRATION: **ASHIF AHMED RUDRO**
PHOTO: **SAZZAD IBNE SAYED**

The evolution of BAISHAKHI CELEBRATIONS

ASHIF AHMED RUDRO

As the first day of the Bangla calendar, Pahela Baishakh is celebrated with festivity, enthusiasm, and interest. The Baishakhi celebration is colourful and has become a significant part of our culture, so much so that it has transcended borders. Like all things, Nababarsha too has a history and it has influenced how the event is celebrated.

The origin of Pahela Baishakh

It was Mughal Emperor Akbar who facilitated the Bangla calendar or Bangabda. The emperor's interest in reforming the calendar was strictly for economic reasons.

Back in those days, taxes were collected according to the Hijri calendar, which is a lunar calendar and was not in sync with agriculture. This confused the farmers and the emperor sought a solution. Upon his commission, Fatehullah Shirazi formulated a new calendar by aligning the Islamic calendar with the harvest season and thus, solving the issue. That's how Bangabda came into being and we got our Pahela Baishakh as the first day of the year.

After several adjustments to the calendar, Pahela Baishakh now always falls on the 14 of April of the Georgian calendar.

Celebration through the ages

We often say that Bengalis are a festive lot. Whenever there's an excuse to celebrate, we accept it with the beat of a heart. Out of all these celebrations, Pahela Baishakh is possibly the most unique with the greatest cultural impact.

The earlier celebrations of Pahela Baishakh involved halkhata. It has survived the test of time and still can be spotted in the shops and businesses

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in rural areas. Halkhata is the opening of a new book for businessmen (once upon a time, Zamindars as well). Festive decorations go hand in hand with halkhata in the form of confetti, flowers, and colourful designs.

Chaitra Sankranti is also another event that has co-existed with Pahela Baishakh. It celebrates the end Chaitra, the last month of the Bangla calendar. The event used to be more prominent in the rural areas than the cities and its celebrations usually involved fairs and festivals.

Red and white attire has been a symbol of Pahela Baishakh for ages. Another tradition is Baishakhi mela (fair). Sometimes these fairs last for a whole month. Kadma, jilapi, sandesh, and such sweetmeats are part of these fairs just like nagordola and bioscope.

As far as organised celebrations are concerned, Chhayanaut and Charukala are the two entities that lead the celebrations of Nababarsha.

Baishakh at Ramna Botomul

The ceremony that essentially kicks off Pahela Baishakh is hosted by Chhayanaut, a cultural organisation established in 1961. When they started the Baishakhi celebration, it was an informal arrangement but the Pahela Baishakh celebration that we have come to know and love as the iconic event of Ramna Botomul began with Chhayanaut in 1967.

With only a handful of artistes, Chhayanaut's first Nababarsha celebration began at the altar of the huge bot (banyan) tree. Interestingly, it's an ashwattha tree but the place is well known by the mellifluous name — 'Ramna-r Botomul.' It has become such a tradition that it's grown into an event that is synonymous with Pahela Baishakh. What began with a handful of artistes is now a culturally significant event.

Since liberation, Pahela Baishakh has grown into a national festival for all Bangladeshis irrespective of caste and creed. And it's not just confined within the border anymore either.

The Mangal Shobhajatra and its evolution

While the programme at the Ramna Botomul is indeed a Baishakhi tradition, Mangal Shobhajatra is arguably more iconic in all senses.

The first step towards it was in 1985, hosted by Charupith (an art research institute) in Jessore. Sculptor Mahbub Zamal Shamim was one of the key persons who nursed the idea and initiated the procession. Back then, it was not known as Mangal Shobhajatra, but rather Pahela Baishakh Shobhajatra.

The next step towards Mangal Shobhajatra was what eventually evolved into the Mangal Shobhajatra that we know today. It happened a couple of years after Charupith's Shobhajatra had started and although it was slightly different, there is no doubt that it was indeed inspired by Charupith's Shobhajatra. Following the overwhelming appreciation for a Shobhajatra in December of 1988 in Dhaka, it was decided that the Pahela Baishakh of 1989 will feature a Baishakhi Shobhajatra.

"Ananda Shovajatra is what it was called at first. The country was in a critical political position at that time and the people were starting to protest. There was this idea of opposing all that is bad and evil. 'Omongol er biruddhe jatra' (journey against evil) was the idea; that's how the name of Mangal Shobhajatra came into being," explained Professor Nisar Hossain, Dean of Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Dhaka, pointing out that 1990 was the first time the possession came out, owning the name 'Mangal Shobhajatra' for the first time. And it became Mangal Shobhajatra because of its socio-political thought and impact of it.

Preparation for the Big Day

Charukala is essentially the centre of the Nababarsha celebration in Dhaka. Not only does Charukala host the Mangal Shovajatra but also puts great effort and invests a lot of time into it. And its admirable how many challenges they take on every year to make this event a success. From the smaller details like the masks and items of the procession to the details like fundraising, they do it all.

Charukala students start working a month before the actual celebration.

"The students work in making the structures and masks for Mongol Shobhajatra. They make paintings, hand-painted masks, paper birds, hand fans, earthen pots, and other items for fundraising. They also prepare a cultural programme for Chaitra Sankranti. Moreover, a jatra takes place on the 2nd of Baishakh participated by current and ex-students of Charukala," said Khandaker Saraf Nahrin Adrika, who is perusing her Masters in Fine Arts at the Department of Drawing and Painting at Charukala.

The modern Pahela Baishakh

The celebration has changed quite a bit over the years. One of the notable changes is that people are participating in the celebration more enthusiastically. Pahela Baishakh is a significant holiday in the country presently.

People now shop exclusively for Pahela Baishakh. The celebration become widespread following the official recognition of Mangal Shobhajatra by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage in 2016.

"People took it as quite an achievement and were spontaneously celebrating," observed Professor Nisar Hossain, who takes this as a positive thing. "All celebrations are aimed at young people. They are willing to accept new things. It's the young people who keep things energetic. Mangal Shobhajatra for example, the students play the main role," he added.

"Everyone is looking for an identity. And everyone wants to have fun and be festive. There's so much struggle in our daily lives with so limited scope of fun. Pahela Baishakh brings a festive opportunity all through the country. I think that's why people are so interested in it," said Fakhrul Islam Mazumder Shakil, a visual artist and educator who had been part of the Mangol Shobhajatra over the years.

Baishakh this year

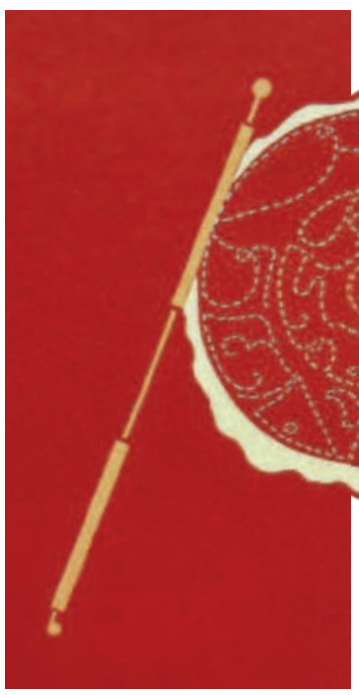
Every year, there is a theme that is decided after much thought. Social, political, and cultural factors all contribute to selecting the theme. This year's theme is "Barisho Dhara – Majhe Shantir Bari" which is essentially a prayer for peace considering the state of the world.

"The theme is chosen exclusively by a committee consisting of the Deans and VC," said Adrika who is actively working to make this year's Baishakh celebration a success.

Pahela Baishakh is such a significant part of Bengali culture that it has become part of our identity. There are very few events that can unify people at such a level with such grace. It's colourful and vibrant, and we hope it continues to keep the festive mood with colourful atmosphere forever.

ILLUSTRATION: **BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY**
PHOTO: **PRABIR DAS**

The beauty of Bangla calligraphy

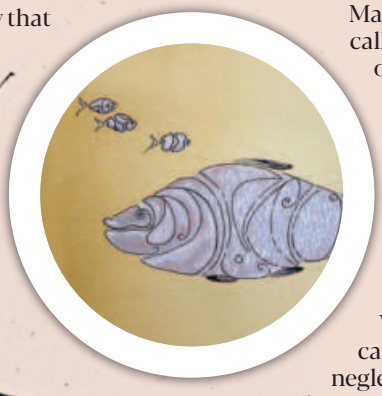


ASHIF AHMED RUDRO

What comes to mind when you hear the word calligraphy? Probably, the fluid artistic representation of the Arabic alphabets, the oriental delight that is the Chinese script, or English letters in Gothic font with extravagant curves. But, have you ever thought about Bangla calligraphy — the beauty of Bengali expressed through lyrical strokes and the endless possibilities it holds as an aesthetic form?

The word calligraphy is a combination of two Greek words — kallos, meaning 'beauty' and graphein, meaning 'to write.' So, calligraphy literally means 'beautiful writing.' It is a form of ornamental handwriting prevalent in various cultures throughout the world and its origin dates back to ancient times.

It will not be an exaggeration to say that Bangla calligraphy has not received much attention until recent times. Considering the fact that we have so many letters, there is a huge potential for Bangla calligraphy to be artistically expressive. Poster and wall writing has been a part of our cultural identity for quite some time now, but it did little for the development of the art.



Many people are interested in calligraphy but only a handful of them practice the art. Even fewer are serious about it. Some people think that calligraphy is just 'good handwriting.' It is so much more than that.

The essence of Bangla calligraphy

While it is true that Bangla calligraphy has largely been neglected, there are very few who are passionately practicing it and fortunately for us, the art form still survives. In fact, it is thriving in the hands of Arham-ul-Huq Chowdhury, an artist working to express the true beauty of Bangla calligraphy in its glory and the devotion is visible in his work.

Having started his artistic endeavour in 1995 with hand-painted furniture and pottery, Chowdhury soon realised that he should do something with calligraphy. In 2000, he had his first-ever solo exhibition of Bangla calligraphy at Goethe Institute, which was also the first one of its kind in Bangladesh. Since then, he's had more than 22 exhibitions in Bangladesh.

Chowdhury wanted to go beyond the norm. "Anyone can write simple scripts like 'Eid Mubarak' or 'Tomake Valobashi'" he said. There are so many different elements of Bangla language that can be expressed in calligraphy and he focused on that. "I like to call them calligraphy painting and believe they are highly communicative," he said, pointing to his artworks.

Shrestha Halder is an amateur calligrapher who has been trying Bangla calligraphy for a couple of years now. His passion was ignited by a love for the fountain pen.

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"One thing I can point out is that the pen for Bangla calligraphy is quite different. The paper can vary depending on what instrument you are using to write, and since I use mostly fountain pen, any fountain pen friendly paper works for me," said Halder.

She elaborated on the different methods and styles she has adopted lately. Devanagari script has similarities with Bangla, and

Halder draws inspiration from Devanagari script in her search for style.

The elements and instruments

Like any other form of art — there are no rules. One may use whatever one is comfortable with as long as one can express themselves in their art and like painters, calligraphers will tell you the same thing. Shrestha Halder for example, is trying out different types of fountain pens and their impressions on different types of papers.

Arham-ul-Huq Chowdhury on the other hand has used many different types of papers and writing instruments in his journey. In the end, he opted for brush; often used on handmade paper.

"I like putting characters in my art and it's visible in my calligraphies. Even the paper itself has a character in the end product," he elaborated, explaining the stories behind some of his best pieces.

"Instead of just plainly scribbling words,

I have a different approach. Bangla language has so many riddles, idioms and phrases, and more interestingly 'Khanar bachans' and such. I try to put them into letters while expressing them in the visuals at the same time," he explained the innovative way of his calligraphy which is not only conspicuous but more challenging as well.

Thus, in his calligraphies, 'biral toposhi' is a cat, which has a saintly look but is a conniving creature at its core.

> **I spend so much time looking at calligraphies of other cultures, comparing different scripts and how Bangla is different from them. How Bangla could be expressed, it's unbelievable.**
>
> Calligrapher
> **ARHAM-UL-HUQ CHOWDHURY**

'Bagher Aari' is a Bengal tiger who is grumpy. 'Godai loskori' is a fully-loaded boat which is exactly what the phrase itself originated from.

All of these are fascinating and one can imagine the effort and research that went behind these creations.

The untold challenges

Arham-ul-Huq Chowdhury has made significant contributions to the field of Bangla calligraphy and amateurs are now getting interested. One of the major issues in the field is that it lacks research. There is barely any reference material, if any at all. Both the professionals and the amateurs agree on this.

"I have no reference material to base my work on. So, I have to turn to Devanagari script or try out different methods. Trial and error; that's how I progress because there is no other way," says Halder.

Chowdhury said, "I spend so much time looking at calligraphies of other cultures, comparing different scripts and how Bangla is different from them. How Bangla could be expressed, it's unbelievable. If you are trying to do Bangla calligraphy, you really have to do everything yourself and from the scratch."

The Bengali culture has always prided itself on its riches. The pride is understandable but at the same time, over the years, we have lost several elements of our valued culture. Without proper attention and interest, Bangla calligraphy could be one of those lost aspects. Considering the beauty and potential of it, we hope that day never comes.

CALLIGRAPHY:
ARHAM-UL-HUQ CHOWDHURY

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Fresh fashion trends for Pahela Baishakh

NUSRATH JAHAN

Pahela Baishakh, the first day of the Bengali calendar, is a vibrant celebration of culture and heritage that falls on 14 April and is celebrated with unmatched enthusiasm among Bengalis all over the world. A quintessential aspect of Pahela Baishakh is the traditional attires adorned by men and women alike. Planning and execution are everything, and fashion enthusiasts make sure to plan out all the details way ahead.

The most traditional combination of plain white sari with red borders or motifs is still among the best trends for Baishakh. The representation of Baishakh with bright shades of red is an age-old tradition in Bengali culture. Although red is often known to be the colour of fire and blood, the red in Baishakh signifies the passion and vitality of life, while the white symbolises innocence, peace, and purity. The saris worn by us in this combination evoke the renewal of life.

Bright flowers printed onto cotton saris are also among the top choices for Baishakh. Inspiration is also taken from the heart of Bangladesh with prints of nature, boats, rickshaws, or even the Baishakh special masks finding their imprints on a canvas of white or red.

This year, traditional Bengali fashion seems to be trending with a few modern twists. The most traditional Bengali drape is back in full swing as ladies have a newly-found appreciation for this style. Not only does this prioritise comfort but also saves us time by replacing the narrow pleats with much wider and simpler ones.

In recent years however, designs have taken a subtle but creative turn towards different geometric as well as abstract patterns. While stripes and checkers have been experimented with in the past, this time white saris with red polka dots and borders are here to add a retro feel to the traditional look. And although red and white still remain the dominant colours for this occasion, blue, magenta and purple can be seen joining the fun to elevate the festive vibes.

This year, traditional Bengali fashion seems to be trending with a few modern twists. The most traditional Bengali drape is back in full swing as ladies have a newly-found appreciation for this style. Not only does this prioritise comfort but also saves us a huge amount of time by replacing the narrow pleats with much wider and simpler ones that only take a minute or two to set. Also, tying the loose end of the sari with a fancy silver or golden key ring and letting it sit effortlessly on our shoulder adds an air of Zamindari era and we quite like it.

The 'mermaid' and 'infinity' are two amazing new styles we have found this year for lightweight saris. As each of these styles is layered with pleats, soft fabrics like linen, silk, or chiffon make it incredibly easy to set the pleats, giving them the perfect flowy finish.

Cotton sari lovers need not be sad though. Jaipuri cotton, handloom, or silk cotton are also being styled in these new drapes, giving these saris a contemporary look while retaining their traditional essence. In short, this is your cheat code to look fabulous in any sari this season.

Another trend catching up to Pahela Baishakh is the pairing of saris with a crop top or a shirt instead of the traditional blouse. Ready-made crop tops are versatile for outfit ideas, come in a wide variety of designs and sizes, and let you skip the huge hassle of getting a blouse tailored and run the risk of disappointment in case of any blunder. This new twist adds a touch of comfort and convenience while elevating the style factor.

Pahela Baishakh is showing us how modernity can also be infused into traditional outfits with the right accessories. A pair of heavy *jhumkas* or a statement necklace is completing our look with cotton saris whereas a contrasting belt around the waist can be seen adding more structure to our silk or chiffon sari. Bracelets made from fresh flowers are the most romantic addition this year and are our new favourite hand jewellery.

Although 14 April is famously known as the day when the sun shows no mercy upon us, we do not necessarily have to compromise our style in trying to stay comfortable. Fashion is all about expressing yourself and feeling confident in what you wear. So, we are going for styles that resonate with our personality and make us feel comfortable while welcoming the Nabo Barsho in style.

PHOTO: SAZZAD IBNE SAYED
MODEL: SUHI
STYLING: SONIA YEASMIN ISHA
MAKEUP: PIYASH
WARDROBE: TANGAIL SAREE KUTIR