

YEAR-END AND NEW YEAR FESTIVALS

A confluence of nature and culture



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We are gradually becoming disconnected and displaced from a once-thriving agrarian world. A clear indication of this trend is our tendency to engage in needless debates over the rituals and festivals associated with year-end and new year celebrations. We constantly attempt to impose artificial binary divisions and authoritarian narratives upon the majority of the country's rural, subaltern population. To truly understand the festivities of the year's end and another beginning, we must understand the local ecosystems and seasonal cycles. It is essential to understand how rural communities establish their cultural relationships with the ecosystems across different seasons.

The relationship between the subaltern population and the living environment is deeply intricate. That is why, during year-end observances, some in the hills prepare Pazon (festive dishes), while those in the plains cook *tita shak* (bitter greens). Some mark the year's end with the blooming of Bhatjara flowers, others with the Bhat flower, some with the Nageshwar, and others with the emergence of Salleaves. These are the outcomes of a millennia-old, complex interaction between nature and culture. Such experiences cannot be hidden or erased by the fabricated binaries of Hindu versus Muslim. Exploitative and oppressive regimes often fear the influence of the rural subaltern culture. Throughout human history, the transitions, beginnings, and ends of seasons have been celebrated through rituals and festivals. These year-end and new year celebrations deliver a collective message about the protection of life and nature, and that message poses a serious threat to the ongoing neoliberal system.

Bhatiporob in Baishakh, Kormadi in Jaishtho-Ashar, Korondi in Shraban, Karam in Bhadro, Dasai in Ashwin, Jalabarta in Kartik, Wanna in Agrabayan, Pushra in Poush, Baghai Shirni in Magh, Ghatabandha in Phalgun, and Chaitporob or Chaitra Sankranti in Chaitra—each marks the seasonal transition with unique cultural expressions. In each season, nature signals its ending and beginning through various living forms. Communities organise rituals to seek permission and blessings for harvesting and using nature's new produce. During the months of Phalgun and Chaitra, nature blossoms



Locals perform the ritual of Charak Puja in the Sundarbans to mark Chaitra Sankranti, or the end of the Bangla year.

Across different regions of the country, year-end and new year celebrations are marked by festivals such as Chaitra Sankranti, Gajan, Del, Neel Puja, Charak, Halkhata, Noboborsho, and the Baishakhi fairs. Chakmas observe the Biju festival in three phases—Phulbiju, Mulbiju, and Gojjapojje. Tanchangyas, Pangals (Muslim Manipuris), and Bishnupriya Manipuris celebrate the Bishu festival. The Gurkhas and Assamese communities in Rangamati also observe the Bihu festival during this time; for the Koch people, too, the festival is known as Bihu. Many among the Hajong community celebrate the Hongorani festival. The Indigenous Bawm people celebrate Chapchar Kut festival. Around the same time, the Marmas observe Sangraing, the Tripuras celebrate Baisu or Baisuk,

the Rakhines observe Sangrain, the Chaks also celebrate Sangraing, the Mros celebrate Changkran, and the Khyiangs mark the new year with their Sanglan festival. The Barman and Koch communities of Bhawal and Modhupur Garh celebrate Chaitra Sankranti through Sanyasi Puja, Gajan, and Charak Puja. Many Indigenous people in the tea gardens of Sylhet observe the Dondoborto festival during this period.

These year-end and new year festivals are generally held around the same time—at the end of Chaitra and the beginning of Baishakh. However, there is no such festival anywhere in the world called “Boi-Sa-Bi.” This awkward and nationalistically motivated term was coined by combining the first

thousands of years, the rural subaltern population has revered these instructions of nature, integrating them into the rhythm of life. From this reverence have evolved numerous rituals and festivals like those marking the year's end and beginning. The mass uprising of July-August 2024 favoured a strong collective voice in favour of expanding this space for people's culture. The state must recognise this public aspiration and channel cultural reform and transformation into an inclusive and pluralistic framework.

The role of bitter greens

In both Bangalee and Indigenous communities, year-end rituals are incomplete without bitter greens and vegetables. Across different regions of the country, people consume 13 to



PHOTO: DIGANTA CHAKMA

Chakma community celebrates Biju festival in Rangamati.

mangoes ripen on the trees. It is customary to seek permission to eat the first mangoes of the season. Among the Rabidas community, the end of the year is observed with the *hajra* ritual. On this day, a mixture of roasted barley powder (*chhatu*) and green mango is prepared and consumed, known as *aam-chhatuya*. During Charak and Baishakhi pujas, green mangoes are often pierced onto iron tridents as part of the offerings. The Rabidas community also places their tools of shoemaking—shovels, scissors, knives, and chisels—at a sacred site known as *Deokuri*. During this time, traditional musical instruments such as dhak, dhol, khajri, and jhajhar are played.

And the trees and flowers...

The Santal calendar year begins in Phalgun, and the Baha festival is observed during this month. Around this time, flowers like Sarjam, Ichauk, Murup, and Mahua bloom across the trees. Through the Baha festival, the Santal community seeks blessings and permission to consume and use the nectar of these flowers. Before Baha, the social use of these blossoms was considered prohibited.

In the hills, the blooming of the Biju or Bhatjara flower signals the arrival of the Biju festival—also referred to by some as the Bei flower. During this time, the Biju bird can be heard calling at the hills. Children, adolescents, and women roam on the hills, in the forests and villages, gathering Bhatjara flowers. These wild blossoms are used to make garlands, exchange greetings, and decorate homes.

Kaikono or Nageshwar flowers are also natural markers of the year's end and beginning. During Sangraing, the Chakma people gather these flowers. On *Paingshwet*, or Flower Day, villages host traditional Chak games like *peko* (spinning tops), *gyang* (top toss), and *maikanikcha* (blindfold game). The second day of Sangraing is *Akyai*, when village youths play instruments like *baik* (drum), *langhowak* (cymbal), and *hne* (bamboo flute) and proceed

together to the *kyang* (temple).

Pujas and fairs

One of the most widely recognised symbols of Chaitra Sankranti is the Gajan, Del, Neel, or Charak troupes that roam village to village. Dressed in red clothes and adorned as Shiva and Gauri—or sometimes masked—they collect alms. The Charak tree made from Sal wood and the Neel wood used in Neel Puja are iconic features of the celebration.

The traditional rural fairs held during Chaitra Sankranti and Pahela Baishakh also serve as grassroots cultural markers. In Gazipur, Moulvibazar, Habiganj, Sylhet, Tangail, Mymensingh, Netrokona, Natore, Pabna, Sirajganj, Chattogram, and various corners of the country, ancient fairs still survive. Records indicate that an ancient Biju fair was once held in Kadalpur, Chattogram, but it has disappeared over time.

People, not the state, are keepers of nature

We are gradually moving away from the intricate markers and symbols of nature. We are losing our connection to the transitions of the seasons and the historical language they embody. As a result, unnecessary debates are emerging around the year's end and beginning, dominated by self-serving elite narratives. The historical relationship between the rural subaltern, agricultural production, and Mother Nature is repeatedly being dismissed. Chaitra Sankranti or Pahela Baishakh marks the transition from one season to another. This moment of transition should be met with harmony and friendship—not with conflict or opposition. People have interpreted nature through various cultural symbols, and the state must ensure the preservation of those symbols.

What does the Bangla New Year mean to me?



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SELIM JAHAN

“What does the Bangla New Year mean to you?” I could hear the question as if coming from thousands of miles away, as a journalist interviewed me on the occasion. She is the head of the Bangla section of a renowned radio station in Europe. We were discussing the Bangla New Year of 1432. As she finished her question, I paused for a while. Usually, at the beginning of a new year, the question that most people face is “how do you feel?” But no, that was not the question asked of me. I hurriedly put together my thoughts and somewhat answered her question. But that question did not leave me altogether. I took time to contemplate further, and it seemed that the Bangla New Year holds five meanings for me: celebration, heritage, identity, universality, and humanity.

The celebratory aspect of the new year is well-known. The fairs in villages, in cities, in big fields, by the roadsides; all those clay dolls, figures of horses and elephants, brides and bridegrooms; the merry-go-rounds and various games all are part of the Bangla New Year celebrations. The Baul songs in rural fairs; the musical gatherings of Chhayanaut in Ramna; dressed-up men and women, boys and girls in new colourful outfits; all the happy and excited children—all reflect the celebratory aspect of the Bangla New Year.

In fact, on the first day of the Bangla New Year, every nook and corner of Bangladesh is brightened. Colours come up on the sarees of women, the punjabis of men, in flower arrangements, in arcades erected. Lines take their places in *alpanas*, on walls, masks, and

paintings. The fine arts students of Dhaka University spend the whole night before the new year drawing alpanas, finishing graffiti on the walls, making masks of various colours and kinds, and creating different figures with coloured papers for the processions next morning. All of these are parts of the Bangla New Year celebration. We welcome the new year by exchanging greetings, singing songs, and savouring traditional Bangalee food. The environment around us becomes thick with the chattering of men and women, of boys and girls, and of the old and the young. Joy, excitement and interest abound all

The Bangla New Year has a universal aspect. On the first day of Baishakh, we come together, irrespective of colour, creed, religion and beliefs. The new year belongs to all of us—we all feel an ownership of it. Yes, there is an English New Year, and various Indigenous communities have their new years, too. Yet, over and above everything, people from all groups take part in the celebrations, enjoy the events, and observe its rituals. It is observed in villages as well as in cities; the rich and the poor observe it simultaneously.



FILE PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

The baul songs in rural fairs, the musical gatherings of Chhayanaut in Ramna; dressed-up men and women, boys and girls in new colourful outfits, all the happy and excited children reflect the celebratory aspect of the Bangla New Year.

around—happiness and celebrations mark the occasion.

The Bangla New Year has an aspect of tradition based on the age-old heritage, the culture, life and the living of the Bangalee society. Some rituals have emerged over time. In some rural areas, at dawn, women swim across the ponds and in one breath and pick green mangoes from the stooping branches of a mango tree. Similarly, the act of cleaning the front yard of the house and drawing alpanas also reflect the tradition of rural Bengal. The simple faith that “If you are fed well on the first day of the new year, you will eat well during the rest of the year,” or the ritual of halkhata—new accounts ledger—by businesses and shopkeepers holds that tradition too.

During the halkhata event, shopkeepers welcome their regular customers and serve different kinds of sweets to them with the

utmost affection and love. The shopkeepers ask for the blessings of the customers so that their businesses do well the whole year. And the red-coloured halkhata, leaning against the cash box of the shop is also part of the tradition. Nearby, one can see the tips of mango leaves in a brass pot, beside which rests a pen and an inkpot.

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