



PHOTO: STAR

## Tracing the timeless rituals of our Bengali soul

### CARNIVALS OF FOLK AND FOOD

The Boishakhi Mela is where the rural soul of Bengal meets the urban appetite for nostalgia. Whether it is the grand fairs in Dhaka or the smaller ones in Chittagong or Manikganj, the mela is a sanctuary of folk crafts, pottery, and the iconic traditional Ferris wheel.

“The first thing I look for is the Nagordola,” says Shahriar Sakib, a final-year private university student. “The creaking sound of the wood and the view from the top make you feel like a child again. And, naturally, the cuisine is unmatched, as nothing surpasses the crisp texture of a murali or khaja at the fair.”

Food is the centrepiece of the Mela culture. While *Panta Ilish* has become a modern urban staple, the authentic experience lies in the street food. “For me, Baishakh is the smell of fried fish and the tang of green mangoes,” says Ishmam Rafiq Hasan, a university lecturer, who visits the fairs in Old Dhaka’s Shankhari Bazar and surrounding areas every year. “We sit on the grass, listen to the baul songs, and eat together. It’s the one day we aren’t concerned about our status; we are just Bangalis.”



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

### DEFYING DARKNESS IN THE DAWN

The celebration is incomplete without the dawn musical programme at Ramna Batamul. This tradition was started in 1967 by Chhayanaout, a leading cultural organisation. At a time when the Pakistani regime sought to suppress Bengali culture and banned the songs of Rabindranath Tagore, Chhayanaout took a stand. They gathered under the ancient banyan tree (Batamul) to greet the new year with Tagore’s “Esho Hey Baishakh”.

Ever since, the banyan tree has served as a sanctuary for the Bengali spirit. Despite the tragic bombing in 2001, the tradition has only grown stronger, proving that the melody of a nation cannot be silenced by fear. Every year, thousands gather in the dim light of dawn, waiting for the first notes of the flute to pierce the silence, signalling that another year of resilience, art, and unity has begun.

As the notes of “Esho Hey Baishakh” sweep away the old, we gather for the beloved tradition of panta ilish. Between this soulful melody and the shared meal, we find the enduring, vibrant spirit of our Bengali identity.

## Baishakh echoes across the nation

MOSHIUR RAHMAN SHAMS

Pahela Baishakh, the Bengali New Year, is one of the most widely celebrated cultural occasions in Bangladesh. While its essence lies in welcoming a new beginning through shared traditions, its expression varies from one city to another. The celebration is shaped by local institutions, cultural hubs, geography, as well as long-standing customs. From university campuses to riversides, each city adds its own flavour to the festivities.

### DHAKA

In Dhaka, the celebration is both symbolic and grand. The cultural core of Pahela Baishakh lies at Ramna Batamul, where Chhayanaout hosts its iconic musical programme. Another focal point of the day is the “Baishakhi Shobhajatra”, organised by the Faculty of Fine Arts at Dhaka University. The procession is recognised by UNESCO for its cultural significance. It moves through Shahbagh and surrounding areas, drawing massive crowds. Throughout the day, key hubs such as TSC, Suhrawardy Udyan, and Dhanmondi Lake host fairs, concerts, and food stalls, with festivities continuing well into the afternoon.

### CHATTOGRAM

In Chattogram, Pahela Baishakh centres around DC Hill, organised by local cultural alliances. DC Hill is widely regarded as the city’s cultural centre,

with programmes running throughout the day featuring music, dance, and recitation. The open hill setting creates a more relaxed atmosphere compared to Dhaka’s dense crowds. Additional events take place at venues such as the Shilpakala Academy and the CRB area, though DC Hill remains the symbolic heart of the celebration.

### RAJSHAHI

In Rajshahi, the celebration is strongly anchored within the University of Rajshahi campus. The university hosts rallies, cultural performances, and fairs, drawing both students and city residents. Beyond the campus, T-Dam and other banks of the Padma River serve as key gathering points, where people come together for traditional food, music, and socialising. Compared to larger cities, Rajshahi’s celebrations feel more community-driven and often extend into the afternoon.

### KHULNA

In Khulna, Pahela Baishakh is distinctly campus-centred, much like in Rajshahi. Celebrations largely revolve around Khulna University and KUET, where rallies, cultural programmes, and fairs are organised by students and faculty. These campus-based events define the city’s festive character. At the same time, areas such as Shibbari Mor and surrounding urban spaces host community fairs, linking academic celebrations with the wider public.



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