



PAHELA BAISHAKH

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The Diverse Colours of Indigenous New Year Festivities

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Pahela Baishakh in Dhaka is characterised by the colourful procession originally known as Mongol Shobhajatra, now officially named the Baishakhi Shobhajatra, Panta-Ilish (the famed fermented rice and Hilsa fish combination) and Halkhata—the opening of the new year's account books. However, the Chittagong Hill



of dawn breaks over the mountains, young men and women gather by mountain springs or riverbanks to float fresh flowers upon the water. This act is more than just a beautiful ritual; it is a symbolic letting go, an earnest plea for the flowing currents to wash away the sorrows, ailments, and frustrations of the past year. In the softness of these drifting petals lies the community's collective prayer for a new year filled with prosperity and peace.

The transition to the second day, April 13th, brings the vibrant heart of the celebration: Mul Bizu. On this day, the air in the hills becomes thick with the aroma of Pachon, a legendary vegetable medley that serves as the culinary soul of the festival. Hospitality reaches its peak during Mul Bizu; doors are thrown open, and every home becomes a sanctuary for friends and neighbours.

The festivities find their serene conclusion on April 14th, known as Gojjepojje. While the name translates to "taking rest," it is truly a day for welcoming the New Year with a calm and reflective spirit. After the excitement of the previous days, the community gathers at Pagodas and temples to light lamps and engage in prayer. Reflecting on these



a graduate student, noted the struggle of balancing these traditions with academics, expressing how she now cherishes the ability to travel home to dance and celebrate in the pandals with her loved ones.

BISHU: The Tanchangya Connection to the Land

The Tanchangya community celebrates Bishu from April 12th to 14th. On Phool Bishu, youth dressed in vibrant Ponchoposhak collect flowers at dawn to offer to the Goddess Ganga at the riverbank, seeking to wash away the frustrations of the past year. The second day, Mul Bishu, features Pachon, prepared with at least five types of Joom vegetables. The festivities culminate on April 14th with the Bishu Mela, a grand social affair filled with traditional music, dance, and theatre.

This cultural tapestry is personified in individuals like Rupaiya Srestha Tanchangya, who was raised by a Bengali mother and a Tanchangya father. She notes that the most striking difference lies in food. "Bengalis grew up in a riverine environment, which shaped their diet around fish and rice. This is quite distinct from the hill tracts, where the centrepiece is Pachon. This dish, crafted from a variety of Joom-grown vegetables, represents the bounty of the earth."

In essence, these diverse celebrations remind us that while the rituals and flavors may differ, the heart of the New Year remains the same. Whether through the floating of flowers in a mountain stream or the sharing of a festive meal, it is a universal journey of gratitude, community, and the timeless hope for a peaceful beginning.

SANGRAI: The Water Festivals of the Marma and Rakhine

The Marma people share a deep cultural bond with the Rakhine people of the coastal plains. Both communities celebrate Sangrai to welcome the New Year. The festivities begin with the ritual of bathing the Buddha, followed by a respectful bathing of the village elders.

The highlight of Sangrai is the Re Long Poye, or water festival. Specially decorated pandals are set up with separate sections for boys and girls to splash water on one another. An interesting myth adds a romantic layer to the fun: it is believed that a boy who splashes water on a specific girl might find a romantic connection leading to marriage. Organisers even facilitate "tactical" placements where boys can pay to stand in a specific line to face the girl they like. This splashing is followed by a feast of sweets like Payesh in the morning, while lunch features Bini Chal (sticky rice), Bash Koral (bamboo shoots), and fresh hill vegetables. Khing Mu,

Tracts reveal a different world where vibrant indigenous communities celebrate their New Year with unique, nature-connected traditions.

BIZU: THE CHAKMA LEGACY OF GRATITUDE

Bizu is a festival intrinsically linked to the cycles of Joom cultivation. It serves as a way for the Chakma people the largest indigenous group in the hill tracts to express deep gratitude for the bountiful harvest of the previous year. They celebrate this three-day festival starting on April 12th.

The journey begins with Ful Bizu, a day defined by a quiet, spiritual grace. As the first light



PHOTOS: ORCHID CHAKMA