



PAHELA BAISHAKH

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PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

A festive
spirit we
share

ADRIN SARWAR

Every year, the air in Bangladesh transforms as the sun rises on the first of Boishakh. Growing up, I took the books and TV programs literally. I once asked my mother if a brand-new sun would rise the next morning. She laughed and explained that while the sun remains the same, it is the spirit of the day, the air and our surroundings, that feels brand new.

For me, Pahela Baishakh meant a holiday, new clothes, and my mother bringing out fresh earthen utensils for a family meal of Panta-Ilish, Bhorta, and sweets. Although I wasn't a fan of the dish, I loved the togetherness; it was a meal meant for sharing. Our mornings were defined by red and white outfits and the echoes of "Esho He Baishakh" from the Ramna Batamul broadcast. We would spend the day at local fairs, club processions, and art competitions, usually ending with a dramatic Nor'wester storm. Today, the celebration has changed; while mornings still feel the same, the rest of the day is spent with friends across the city. Now it ends with a weary feet and a happy heart. This "new sun" I witnessed is part of a much older rhythm. For previous generations, Baishakh was a seasonal transformation rooted deeply in the soil of rural Bengal.

A MONTH OF CHILDHOOD WONDER

For Ferdousi Akter Dolly, a homemaker from Comilla, Pahela Baishakh was a month-long marathon of joy. Her memories are anchored to the banks of the Meghna River. "Next to the temple, a fair was organised every Tuesday throughout the entire month of Boishakh," Dolly recalls. People arrived by launch and



trawler, with children playing flutes as they walked. It wasn't about fashion then; it was about the tang of jujube pickles and the sweetness of naru. While children bought bangles, the elders bought essential tools like winnowing fans and gail (wooden mortars). "It was a time of such excitement that students would skip school just to spend the day at the fair," she recalls with a smile.

This rural pulse is echoed by poet Dr. Bimal Guha, who remembers the transition in the village of Bajalia, Satkania. For Guha, the celebration began with Choitra Sangkranti, a time of purification. "Garlands of Neem leaves and Kathgolap were hung on every door to purify the air," he notes. He highlights the Saptopodi Shak, a medicinal meal of seven leafy greens like bitter Gimashak, believed to cure winter ailments. As the New Year dawned, the dry bed of the Shankha River hosted the Baruni Mela, where elders took ritual baths, and children flew kites, ignoring the heat in favour of watermelon and cantaloupe.

THE ORIGIN OF PAHELA BAISHAKH

Pahela Baishakh began as a practical Mughal fiscal reform. To align tax



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

collection with harvest cycles, Emperor Akbar commissioned Fatehullah Shirazi to create the 'Tarikh-e-Elahi' in 1584, which eventually became the Bangabda. This birthed the 'Halkhata' (new ledger) tradition and the 'Punya' revenue festival. Bimal Guha notes these customs were so efficient that the British later adopted similar practices in Murshidabad.

PURE JOY AND SMALL SAVINGS

In the mid-20th century, the festival remained a sanctuary of "pure, unadulterated joy." Kamrul Huda Pathik, a college principal from Munshiganj, recalls saving small coins for months. "We would buy knives to peel mangoes, toy drums, and toy pistols; we would eat watermelon and tokhma sherbet while watching puppet shows," he recalls.

For the young, the festival was a unifier where shared heritage was the only language spoken. However, Kamrul Huda laments the modern shift: "Now, the Baishakhi fair has become a luxury for the wealthy to eat Panta-Ilish, and the sincere warmth between families is gone." Bimal Guha agrees, noting that Panta-Ilish is an urban invention; in villages, the focus was always on the mela, the kites, and

communal sweets.

KEEPING THE TRADITION ALIVE

The festival's most significant evolution occurred in the 1960s. When the Pakistani government tried to suppress Bengali culture, the gathering at Ramna Batamul became an act of peaceful resistance. By singing Tagore's songs, Bengalis asserted that their heritage was inseparable from their existence.

This spirit of defiance was inherited by the students of Fine Arts at Dhaka University, who in the 1980s launched the "Baishakhi Shobhajatra", originally known as the "Mangal Shobhajatra". Today, student Atika Anjum Aurthy describes the two-week preparation as a "sleepless workshop" of mask-making and sora painting. Despite challenges, the struggle to protect this culture continues.

A BRIDGE OF BELONGING

For Nepali student Pramila Pam Rai a student of Asian University for Women, Pahela Baishakh was a journey from observer to participant. "An April New Year felt strange at first," she says, but any sense of being an outsider quickly vanished. Dressed in red and white, she was moved by the festival's inclusivity: "No one asked where I was from; they simply welcomed me."

A HERITAGE HELD CLOSE

From the bliss of riverbank melas to the medicinal greens of the village, Pahela Baishakh is a story of constant movement. It belongs to no single person, but to the collective memory of a nation. Whether celebrated with a sophisticated urban parade or a simple Halkhata tradition, the core remains: a "fresh start."