

Gearing up for Pahela Baishakh

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Sushmita Saha illustrates how the youth of the country have played an instrumental role in celebrating Pahela Baishakh through generations



SOURAV LASKAR

Students of the Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Dhaka are busy preparing masks, artworks, motifs and festoons that the mass would carry out on Pahela Baishakh to celebrate the Bengali New Year 1422 in three days. Over the years, the celebration that is largely participated by the Bengalis across the section has become more vibrant. While the fine arts institute has been largely at the forefront of organising the festivals, the exuberance has spilled over to other institutions that have been carrying out similar programmes, albeit in small scale, to embrace the day.

This year too, student groups in various universities are busy preparing for the day with colourful celebration.

Students of Bangladesh University of Professionals will take out a rally this year to celebrate the day. 'Amidst our daily hectic schedule, only one day we get to celebrate in Bengali style. Thus, we leave no stone unturned to start the year in Bengali traditions so that we never forget our roots and act accordingly for the rest of the year,' says Kankar Dutta, the president of BUP Cultural Forum.

‘People identify the students of private universities devoid of Bengali essence. This is a fallacy,’ says Kazi Mohammad Abrar Faisal, the president of North South University Shangkritik Shangathan. ‘We are well acquainted to our culture and tradition and Pahela Baishakh happens to be the best occasion to cherish Bengali spirit. Our youth will carry the legacy of doing justice to our heritage,’ adds Abrar.

The youths, identifying culture and traditionalism residing in the warp and woof of Bengali civilisation, would bring forward the symbols of Bengali tradition like palanquin, folk and mystic music compositions like Gambhira gaan, Baul gaan, puppet shows and the likes in their campus celebration.

Pahela Baishakh, the first day of Bangla calendar, is the quintessence of Bengali’s celebration of traditionalism. Pahela (First) Baishakh (the first month of Bangla calendar), dated on April 14 as per the Gregorian calendar, brings merriment and peace in the lives of Bengalis who irrespective of religion, cast, creed and geographical boundaries; come together with a view to welcoming the Bengali New Year. Even Bengalis residing abroad rejoice at Naba Barsha (New Year).

Though Pahela Baishakh remains the prime occasion that welds Bengalis all over the world together and acquaints them to their roots; the foundation of the gala day, de-facto, lies on a more solemn ground.

The emergence of the Bangla New Year dates back to the reign of Mughal Emperor Akbar. During his power of influence (1556-1609), the economy was agro-based and tax was collected from the peasants following the Hijri calendar which is, in essence, a lunar calendar. The tax collection period did not go hand in hand with the harvest times which led to peasants being coerced to pay taxes out of season, sometimes even subjected to physical violence. Getting at the root of the problem, Emperor Akbar instructed Fateullah Shiraji, a distinguished scholar and astronomer in his court to bring reformations in the calendar with the intention of synchronising taxes with harvests. Shiraji framed a new calendar on the basis of Solar and Hijri Lunar calendars and thus Bengalis secured their new calendar. At that time, it was termed as Fashali Shon (Agricultural Year); however, subsequently it came to be known as Bengali New Year.



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Youth participation has always been a major aspect of celebrating and pulling off the Bengali New Year festivities. Youth of the country has been gracefully adding new sparks to the celebration of Pahela Baishakh, where students of Fine Arts through generations have played an instrumental role in popularising and strengthening the essence of Pahela Baishakh.

‘Pahela Baishakh happened to be a long awaited day for us,’ says Rowshan Ara, a graduate from the Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Dhaka. ‘We literally used to cool our heels the whole year for this day to turn up. It was an occasion where we could rejoice the true spirit of being Bengali,’ Rowshan reminisces.

Rowshan graduated from Institute of Fine Arts in 1985. The then celebration of Pahela Baishakh was not as grand as it is now. ‘Painting alpana was our prime activity on the eve of Chaitra Shankranti (the evening before Pahela Baishakh). The exuberant students prepared colourful masks which they used to wear and roam around on the day of the festival,’ she narrates. Vibrant rallies, mass gathering were not as much a part of the celebration of the Bengali New Year back then. ‘Although our celebration of this day was not as massive as present times, the ambience was filled to the brim with the charm of Bengali spirit,’ enlightens Rowshan.

Mangal Shobhajatra (The Baishakhi Parade) became a part of the Bengali New Year celebration in 1989, organised by the students of Institute of Fine Arts. The legacy is still running by the worthy successors for 27 years on the trot, at even broader scale with more dynamic activities in the bag. Bengalis from all walks of life join the ranks of the greatest rally of the year with alacrity to receive the new day of the New Year with open arms and cherish traditionalism. Rowshan Ara, being a former student of Institute of Fine Arts, feels proud of the students of Fine Arts for their excellent and noble drive to bind the whole nation together with the strings of Bengali culture.

‘The mass participation in Mongal Shobhajatra is really laudable. However, we used to make all the artworks for the merriment of people, we never sold them. This is also a change in the celebration of Pahela Baishakh that took place over time,’ Rowshan tells New Age Youth.



INDRAJIT GHOSH

‘The Mongol Shobhajatra rally is enormous and embellished with a wide variety of artworks prepared by the Fine Arts students,’ says Md Shahabuddin Shek, a final year masters student of the Institute of Fine Arts.

‘Conversant with Bengali’s sensitivity for this festival, every year we try to add innovation in making the artworks which will be demonstrated in the rally. The artworks are prepared in line with the culture and tradition of our country; they incorporate shora painting (painting earthenware), oil-painting, paper-mash and more,’ Shahabuddin explains. ‘The main programme and the cost of the raw materials needed to prepare the artworks of the Fine Arts students is financed by selling them to art-lovers. Not only the students, but the faculties also cooperate with us in raising fund for the big programme by providing us with their artworks. We try to bring Bengali’s biggest celebration into being by dint of our industry,’ Shahabuddin makes no bone about selling of artworks centring Pahela Baishakh.

Besides giving it a vibe of Bengali culture and tradition, the Fine Arts students seek to give an insightful message through the celebration. By drawing the ongoing political mayhem into attention, this year they want to convey a message of peace and non-violence through their artworks.

A radical change that occurred in the youth contribution towards celebration of Pahela Baishakh over the years, is the take out of Mangal Shobhajatra rally for the first time by BRAC University last year.

‘It was an attempt to cherish and uphold the spirit of Bengali tradition,’ says Juthi Ahmed, former president of Art Society of BRAC University, which carried out the decorations in the programme. The colourful adornment of the rally ascribes to the guidance of the students of Institute of Fine Arts, Juthi informs New Age Youth. ‘A musical programme was arranged to welcome the New Year followed by the rally. Besides, splendid cultural programmes and a small Baishakhi fair were carried out by different clubs of BRAC University,’ she added, ‘We are grateful to BRAC University for sponsoring the whole event and giving us an opportunity to cherish this lifetime experience,’ Juthi pans out.

However, this year they could not take enough preparation to pull off the programme due to the ongoing political turmoil.

Bangladesh, an ancient land proudly carrying out the legacy of traditional aura, has her soul inextricably linked with the thousand years old values and customs. Despite the tender touch of modernism, Bengalis have not dampened the spirit of their culture by celebrating the traditional festivals with much pomp and ardour. ‘The young souls have been amazing us generations after generations, by their innovative ideas, appetite for knowledge and their efforts to preserve our identity as a Bengali. We can just hope the legacy continues,’ says Rowshan Ara, much gratified.