

## "Market Beyond Control"

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Conflicts and crises are sometimes shadowed by celebrations. The *Pahela Baishaakh*, the first day of Bangla New Year, was celebrated with much fervour and enthusiasm in Dhaka and in many other places in Bangladesh in the last mid-April. An annual event for the last few decades the celebrations pull millions of people on the streets, in colourful processions, in parks, in musical and cultural functions, and in fairs of handicrafts and books. The number of people and events in places, rural, urban, suburb and peri-urban areas, across the country is swelling with each passing year. A Bangalee carnival indeed! The euphoria shadows seeds of conflict.

It was an annual event for centuries in the farming life and to the traders in Bangladesh. Once upon a time, 1414 years ago, Akbar, a Moghol emperor, introduced the Bangla year to streamline revenue collection coordinating with the paddy harvesting time. The traders initiated *Haal Khhaataa*, literally, updating the books of accounts, a business celebration to collect dues and debts from the regular buyers and customers to whose pockets the harvesting poured some money. The people celebrated it in their own way, a secular way. Village fairs were organized in different places. It is still a secular event in the life of the people.

Over the decades the celebrations evolved with the pressing needs, moods, protests and struggles of the Bangalee people. It turned to a tool for protest and struggle in the area of culture by the Bangalee nationalist forces against the ruling clique and ideology of Pakistan of which the present Bangladesh was a province and a ground for exploitation and extraction similar to a colony. Chhayanat, a pro-Moscow left-led cultural organization, initiated the celebration of Bangla New Year as a protest in the form of asserting cultural identity that virtually challenged the ideology sold in Bangladesh, it was the province of East Pakistan then, by the ruling clique of Pakistan. The cultural movement with ideological-political agenda was led by the politicized enlightened section of the urban middle class of the province. They identified a traditional symbol, the *Pahela Baishaakh*, organized a function rendering Bangla songs, mainly songs composed by Tagore in a Dhaka-park, related it with the Bangalee psyche, gradually and successfully mobilized a section of the Bangalee urban middle class around it, sowed seeds of national identity and undercut the ruling ideas for bondage to Pakistan. It was a few scores of persons who gathered under a banyan tree in the Ramna Park in the first year of the initiative. There were, all over the province, many other cultural organizations including the pro-Peking *Krantee* that also initiated and carried on the cultural movement. As the time moved towards the Great War of Liberation in 1971, the brilliant time in the history of the Bangalee nation, the cultural mobilization widened and deepened. Remaining faithful to reaping profit the *Haal Khhaataa* continued almost like a ritual without any heed to the nationalist fervour and the changing political atmosphere. Probably they had secret support to the cultural initiatives.

Confined only in the city of Dhaka in the early years of Bangladesh the urban *Pahela Baishaakh* celebration widened in the post-75 years. With the passing

years since the days Ershad took control of the power in 1982 the celebration took mammoth turn and politicized protesting tune. The carnival appearance in the celebration came through the initiative and participation of the students, especially from the cultural institute in the Dhaka University and from the university itself. Huge masks and replicas of animals symbolizing messages and ridiculing symbols adorned colourful huge processions organized by the students. Characters of establishment and of status quo got satirized looks by the crafty hands of the institute students with the masks, jumbo sized a few of those, they designed and the processionists carried. The processions turned mammoth as the ordinary people other than the culturally active section of the middle class joined in the streets making it a show of disgust and discontent as avenues of expression were made narrow, as attempts were made to muzzle down voices of protest, as efforts were made to vandalize and depoliticize political arena. The celebrations spread to many parts of the country. It was the other cities in the country that adopted the celebrations first, followed by district level towns, and then came the smaller communities. In places it is the establishment, as reports the press, and in places it is the cultural organizations and educational institutions that take the initiatives for the celebrations. Commodity is wrapped with a cultural colour as a number of multinationals are now capitalizing, for the last few years, the festive mood of the people by sponsoring cultural events and fairs under the guise of asserting cultural identity which is actually advertising respective commodities.

Under the guise of nationalization and denationalization the ruling segment successfully demobilized workers mainly in the state-run industries, an impact of plunderocracy of the, by the and for the ruling segments. Then came the sewing sector, the garments factories with its legion of workers, mainly the females from the rural areas. Vast portion of the newly organized legion joined in the celebrations, marches and songs as they are quickly adapting to the urban way and style of life. With them were lots of working fellows from the informal sector, the "fruit" of the neo-liberal policies. In the Bangla New Year celebrations now they, not the city-living-Tagore song practicing middle class, are the majority. The national press reports: it was millions on the capital-city streets on the Bangla New Year Day. Other than ordinary persons only the middle class cannot make millions on the streets.

Now it is the expression, from their, the ordinary guys, part, of holiday aspiring for a well lighted and well ventilated life and tomorrow it will be expression of discontent demanding a well lighted and well ventilated life. Manifestation of popular culture shall overwhelm the elitist culture, a mixture of all, pseudo-urban Bangalee, Hindi, distorted and partial Anglo-American carried into home by the electronic media. One, of the ordinary people, moored in their life and struggles while the other, of the dominant segments, borrowed, copied and shallow. Struggles for production and in class arena provide life-blood to one while the other feeds on profiteering and plundering; one reflects life while the other mirrors lumpen character. The equation will force the later one to the backstage. This is the historico-cultural dynamics.

The class-differentiations in the celebrations do not wither away. There those were and there they are though sublime at some moments of history. The neo-rich are there with their usual thirst for celebrations and zeal to spend money. A national Bangla daily reported that a person, an owner of a garments buying company, a trader, purchased a pair of *Eeleesh, Hilsha Ilisha*, with

Taka, the Bangladesh currency, six thousand. The pair weighed 4.25 kilograms. The cold-blooded fish seller hawked for Tk seven thousand for the pair. But the garments buying house owner made a good bargain and won the game, *a bon marche*. The fish trader sold another pair weighing 4.5 kilograms at Tk 7,000 the other day (*The Daily Ittefaq*, April 14, 2008). The *Eeleesh* pair was procured to celebrate the Bangla New Year as consuming *Paantaa Vaat*, the watered rice mainly the rural poor consume in the morning, and fried *Eeleesh*, mainly the rich now-a-days enjoy, have appeared as the widely practiced neo-style of the town and city-living neo-rich. In Barisal, a southern neo-city, the fish dignified by money weighing more than a kilogram was sold at the rate of Tk 1,200-1,300 and the smaller sizes were sold at the rate of Tk 1,000 each. The Hilsha story does not terminate here. Quoting a fish traders' association leader the daily informed : The total amount of the familiar fish sold from a market in the capital city from morning to evening on the eve of the New Year Day valued to about Tk 4 million. It was the upper segment of the society that dominated the *Hilsha* market. The middle class trailed behind. The wholesale *Hilsha* market in the capital city traded Tk 10.25 million in a day prior to the festivities. Satires for innumerable times over the last few years in the dailies and weeklies have not made these neo-rich ashamed of this pseudo Bangalee practice, the *paantaa-eeleesh*.

While a neo-rich along with neo-segment brothers enjoy hot fried fish and watered rice, now not the food of the poor but a sophisticated food item, how much a poor earn? For an average working person in the informal sector in the capital city it is, on an average, Tk 200-250 a day. Quoting Halima, a female day-labourer, the daily informed in the same report that the wage of the labourer was Tk 150. The day-labourer complained that she had to pass three days without work after a day's work. This was the employment scenario in the informal market. Halima went to a market to buy the beloved fish as her only minor son expressed the desire to have it. But she failed after two hours of bargaining. The amount of money she had was not enough to fulfil the desire of a minor boy from a poor family. Halima had to go back without the coveted fish. And, what the atmosphere in the food market was? The coarse rice was Tk 35-37 in the capital city as the above mentioned daily reported in its April 5 number. A few headlines and summaries of news, taken randomly from the same daily tell, at least a partial, picture: "flour price rising", "Sales centres run by BDR, the border defence force, to be increased", "The committee headed by the chief of the government to control the market situation starts work", "Prices of flour are rising daily after the rise of prices of rice and lentil" (1); "The poor are passing life sub-human in standards", tells a former member, equivalent to a minister, of the government ; he said persons are consuming 12 hundred calories who once consumed 16 hundred calories; The Asian Development Bank director general said: low-income people are in severe crisis due to the on-going food crisis (2); "Market beyond control", "Can the people survive?" (3); "Special US envoy is coming to see the food crisis in Bangladesh" (4); " It is not silent famine, it is hidden hunger in the country now, says the food adviser, equivalent to minister" (5); "The queue lengthens as the prices rise", "Now it is loaf, biscuit, soap and cosmetics in the race of price hike"(6); "Not salary increase, food-ration required, deputy commissioners, head executives at district level opine" (7); "BDR opens 25 new rice sales centres in the capital city" (8); " Thousands in the rice queue in

front of open market sales centres in mid-night in Rangpur, Keshabpur, Kalaroa" (9); "School students in the OMS queue" (10); "Road blockade in Dinajpur as rice was not available in OMS, baton charge in Kurigram" (11); "Middle class is in the OMS queue" (12); "Donors are not assisting in resolving the food crisis", says the finance advisor (13).

What were the other celebrations in the life of the capital city and in other cities in that period? These were : lottery, live concerts, inter-national trade expo, fashion show, singer -search campaign, inauguration of restaurant, New Year fair, musical soiree, function bidding farewell to the year gone, drama festival, kite flying competition, spring fair, and many others. What the multinationals offered during the period to their would-be- valued customers? New cell phone set, discount sale of fashionable clothes and shoes for the New Year, summer sales offer of ice cream and other items, lowered new rate of the cell phone calls that would allow freedom to talk, automobile and education fairs, hundreds of thousands of Taka in cash as sales offer, discount with summer-tour to foreign land, shinny silky hair, and many other amazing discounts, etc.

A fashion designer, claimed to be internationally renowned, said in a press conference on the eve of a fashion show : our people know magic(14). It is really a magical reality! What is the name of this magical reality? Profit's indifference? A masquerade truth? Or, is it a show of lumpenocracy? Does it adorn the ruling segments? The same daily in a lead news informed : The poor are increasing in number; people have not got emancipated from the clutches of poverty since independence 37 years ago(15). There are two ways of celebrations determined by the size of purse and determining the dynamics of social mobilization. Here lies a seed of conflict, now overshadowed by celebrations, in appearance class-neutral but actually acutely segmented. It shall rise with full force changing the dynamics of the celebrations. Has not history abhorred similar shows of acrid truth in many other lands on many other occasions? And, shall not history tell to the ruling segments that live happily in islands of spending spree amidst vast expanse of poverty? □□□

*Sources: I. The Daily Ittefaq, 2008, March (M) 24; 2. ibid, M 25; 3. ibid, M 26; 4. ibid, M 27; 5. ibid, April (A) 4; 6. ibid, A 5; 7. ibid, A 6; 8. ibid, A 7; 9. ibid, A 8; 10. ibid, A 10; II. ibid, A II; 12. ibid, A 12; 13. ibid, A 16; 14. ibid, A 4; 15. ibid, M 27.*