

Essay on Pahela Baishakh – The First Day of The Bengali New Year

Pahela Baishakh, the first day of the Bengali year is celebrated in a festive manner in both Bangladesh and West Bengal. In Bangladesh, Pahela Baishakh is a national holiday, which falls on April 14 or 15.

The festival is celebrated with songs, dances, regional games, kite-flying, ox fighting or reciting of poems with all their regional traits and festivity.

Pahela Baishakh marks a new beginning, a new hope, a year full of joy, well-being, and prosperity. The day is spent in feasting and pacific Selected Essays for Advanced Learners' 373 participating in cultural activities. People wish each other "Shubho Nabo Barsho" Pahela Baishakh is indeed a momentous occasion in the life of each and every Bengalee. It is the first day of Bangla calendar year. To every Bengalee, young and old, rich and poor, wise and ignorant, it is a time of gaiety to be celebrated with great merry-making.

The Pahela Baishakh so warmly celebrated all over the country originated not from Bangladesh but from an entirely different part of this sub-continent more than a thousand miles away. What is more, the Bangla Saal (Year) was introduced not by any Bangladeshi. What is popularly known as Bangla Saal today saw the light of day through an ordinance promulgated by Akbar, the Great. It was to immortalize a momentous occasion, a crucial juncture of history that the great Moghul introduced this new system of calendar more than 400 years ago.

The calendar so introduced was originally known as Tarikh-e-Elahi and it was introduced on the 10th or 11th March in the 29th year of Akbar's reign i.e. in 1585 A. D. It, however, dates from the day of

Akbar's ascent to the throne of Delhi and commemorates his coronation as the Emperor of India in 1556. The Second Battle of Panipat and the Coronation of Akbar as the Emperor of India are indeed great events in the annals of history.

From the very beginning of his reign, Akbar felt the need of introducing a uniform, scientific, workable and acceptable system of calculating days and months through a reformed calendar. With this end in view, he commissioned Amir Fathullah Shirazi, a distinguished scientist and the most famous astronomer of the day, to make a recommendation for the reformed calendar. Abul Fazal, the renowned scholar and a minister of Akbar the Great, in his scholarly work Akbar Narnah, gives details of the events leading to the new era under the Royal Forman of Akbar. Abul Fazal explains that the use of the Hijrah (Hegira) Era was unfair to the peasantry because 31 lunar years were equal to 30 solar years and the revenue was collected on the basis of lunar years whereas the harvest depended on the solar ones. Abul Fazal was right because the lunar year consists of 354 days and the solar years have 365 or 366 days. Thus there is a difference of 11 or 12 days between the lunar and the solar years. The New Year subsequently became known as Bangabda or Bengali year.

The months of the new Bengali Era (or Tarikh-e-Elahi) were initially known as Karwadin, Ardi, 'Vihisu, Khordad, Teer, Amardad, Shahriar, Aban, Azur, Dai, Baham, and Iskander Miz. Nobody knows for sure how and when naming the months as Baishakh, Jaishtha, etc started. It is presumed that these months, based on the names of the stars, were derived from the Shakabda which was introduced in 78 A.D. to commemorate the reign of the Shaka dynasty in this subcontinent.

The system of celebrating Nababarsha or Pahela Baishakh (1st of Baishak) was also introduced by Akbar the Great. After introducing Tarikh-e-Elahi, he abolished the hitherto practiced Muslim festivals

and replaced them by 14 new festivals, one of which was Nawroze or the celebration of the New Year's Day.

Celebrations of Pahela Baishakh started from Akbar's reign. It was customary to clear up all dues on the last day of Chaitra. On the next day or the first day of the New Year, landlords would entertain their tenants with sweets. On this occasion there used to be fairs and other festivities. In due course, the occasion became part of domestic and social life and turned into a day of merriment. The main event of the day was to open a halkhata or new book of accounts. This was wholly a financial affair. In villages, towns, and cities, traders and businessmen closed their old account books and opened new ones. They used to invite their customers to share sweets and renew their business relationship with them. This tradition is still practiced, especially by jewelers.

New Year's festivities are closely linked with rural life in Bengal. Usually, on the day everything is scrubbed and cleaned. People bathe early in the morning and dress in fine clothes and then go to visit relatives, friends, and neighbors. Special foods are prepared to entertain guests. Baishakhi fairs are arranged in many parts of the country. Various agricultural products, traditional handicrafts, toys, cosmetics as well as various kinds of food and sweets are sold at these fairs. The fairs also provide entertainment, with singers and dancers staging Jatra, Pala Gan, Kavi Gan, Jail Gan, Gambhira Gan, Gazir Can and Alkap Gan. They present folk songs as well as baul, marfati, murshidi and bhatiali songs. Narrative plays like laily-Majnu, Yusuf- Zukekha and Radha-Krishna are staged. Among other attractions of these fairs are puppet shows and merry-go-rounds.

Many old festivals connected with New Year's Day have disappeared, while new festivals have been added. With the abolition of the zamindari system, the punya connected with the closing of land

revenue accounts has disappeared. Kite flying in Dhaka and bull racing in Munshiganj used to be very colorful events. Other popular village games and sports were horse races, bullfights, cockfights, flying pigeons and boat racing. Some festivals, however, continue to be observed, for example, Bali or wrestling in Chittagong and Gambhira in Rajshahi.

In recent years observance of Pahela Baishakh has become popular in the cities. Early in the morning people gather under a big tree or on the bank of a lake to witness the sunrise. Artistes present songs to welcome the New Year. People from all walks of life wear traditional Bengali dresses: young women wear white saris with red borders and adorn themselves with bangles, flowers, and 'tips'. Men wear white pajamas and kurta. Many townspeople start the day with the traditional breakfast of 'panta bhat' (cooked rice soaked with water), green chilies, onion, and fried hilsha fish.

The most colorful New Year's Day festival takes place in Dhaka. Large numbers of people gather early in the morning under the Banyan Tree at Ramna Park where Chhayanat artistes open the day with Tagore's famous song, Eso he Baishakh eso eso (Come O Baishakh, come), welcoming Baishakh. A similar ceremony welcoming the New Year is also held at the Institute of Fine Arts, University of Dhaka. Students and teachers of the institute take out a colorful procession and parade around the campus. Social and cultural organizations celebrate the day with cultural programs. Newspapers bring out special supplements. There are also special programs on radio and television.

Pahela Baishakh, Bengali New Year's Day, is now celebrated at the national level.