

Let us celebrate Chaitra Sangkranti

by Farhad Mazhar

The word 'sangkranti' implies the moment of transition that has no beginning and no end; the notion is not linear, but cyclical. The sun moves through space and every month crosses each of the signs of the zodiac, known as rashi, and completes twelve cycles of the year. So there is no 'new' year but return of the cycle, or the 'chakra'. In the cyclic movement, every point is literally the end of the cycle as well as the beginning. There is no new beginning, and therefore no 'past' in the linear sense of the term. The word 'sangkranti' captures this notion of the eternal return of the 'origin', where the 'origin' cannot be located in any linear scale of time but in the omnipresent everywhere. If we draw a line we can locate a point where the line begins and ends. Any point could be the beginning. This is not the case with a circle. A point in a circle is both its origin as well as its end; it starts and closes a cycle.



In Bangla the cyclical return of time is also known and experienced as 'ritu'. The word 'ritu' is usually translated as 'seasons' and thus it loses the context of the cyclical notion of time. Perhaps we lose more in such literal translation. For example, the word 'rituboti' implies fertility for women. So the notion has very deep implications connected to the reproduction of the human species. Time is not merely any objective time outside human beings, but the eternal return of a unique being in the womb of the universe. Time presupposes this corporeal being, the human. This is the reason why Kamalakanta, the renowned philosopher of the Bhakti tradition, asked Kali, the Goddess of time: 'If you claim to be time, the "mohakal", how come you have the skulls of humans around your neck? Your presence presupposes the presence of human beings. It is true that human beings exist in time and are therefore perishable, but it is also true that any notion of time also presupposes the presence of human beings. There is no time outside human existence.'

In contrast to new year or 'nababarsha', the celebration of 'sangkranti' is far more interesting, philosophically and culturally fascinating and could open up a new horizon in our efforts to construct us as 'people' with the distinction that could add diversity to the global community. The yearly solar cycle starts on the last day of the last month of the Bengali year. The cycle ends and begins on Chaitra Sangkranti. It is on the 30th of Chaitra. In Bengali culture, celebrating Chaitra Sangkranti is more important than celebrating Pahela Baishakh or New Year's Day. In 'sangkranti' there is no notion of 'new' and 'old' year. Secondly, the moment of transition is very brief. So celebration to mark the transition can be as long as one wishes. In the villages of Bangladesh it could be a week or more, and may include the first day of Baishakh as well. Since the notion of time follows the seasonal pattern, it defies linearity. The cycle is not merely of time, it is also the return of the 'ritu', fertility and the ecological and hydrological cycles including the totality of human relations with the nature. There are various rituals, celebrations, cultural practices related to Chaitra Sangkranti. They vary from area to area, village to village, community to community. The cultural practice of Chaitra Sangkranti is diverse, albeit with some common elements. The time in 'sangkranti' comes back again and again and it is never a 'new' time. The last becomes the first again. If we intend to keep ourselves linked with the local practices, with the 'bhab' or the way of being in our culture, it is important that we understand 'sangkranti' more deeply and situate ourselves in the rich metaphors, imaginations and cultural practices of our people. So celebration of Chaitra Sangkranti is very important for us.

Celebration of Chaitra Sangkranti is different in different areas. For example, in Dinajpur women clean the house in the morning on the last day of the month of Chaitra. They bathe and

pour a pot of water on the Tulshi plant, so that it is refreshed. This is a symbolic action by women with regard to the Tulshi plant, since it is a sacred plant, but it could be with any plant. Even communal identification of Tulshi as belonging to Hindu practices could not stop Muslim women doing the same in sangkranti. During Chaitra, it is usually dry and the plants need water. By watering the Tulshi the people want to ensure that all the plants will have water. Women's relation to nature and biodiversity is symbolically represented by the act of watering.

The most important part of Chaitra Sangkranti is to cook 14 different kinds of shak (herb), preferably uncultivated. Shak cooking is very special and is full of diversity. The shaks have beautiful names: kolmi, lune, henchi, notey, dheki, kumra shak, shushni, lau shak, gima, etc. The farmers eat lau shak before going to the field for ploughing. Women and young girls go to the fields and collect shak, particularly those which are bitter in taste, such as the gima. This is eaten in the afternoon. On this day, fish, meat or eggs are strictly prohibited. It is a full vegetarian day for people of all religions, castes and classes. This is extremely significant from the perspective of ecology and biodiversity. Collection of uncultivated shaks is also a kind of ecological auditing during Chaitra Sangkranti. Unavailability of a particular plant is seen as an ecological crisis and sign of wrong agricultural practices. So vegetarianism in the Chaitra Sangkranti is not merely a ritual; it is deeply related to the practice of ecological auditing of the farming practices of rural Bengal.

Another important aspect of Chaitra Sangkranti is to consume Paira-Chhatu (barley) or powder-cake made from millets. This is a particular way to appreciate certain plants that are drought-resistant and can save lives in times of famine.

The first day of Baishakh is very important for farmers. In Narsingdi, for example, the farmers follow a certain tradition for planting seeds. Early in the morning, they go to the field with 'bashi mukh' (without washing their faces) and plough the land. Women clean the courtyard with cow dung. They cook a sweet dish with rice and molasses called 'kheer', but no milk is added. Women then bathe and bring paddy seeds to the cleaned courtyard and strew the paddy seeds on it. The wet seeds are then taken to the field for planting. After planting the seeds, they put the 'kheer' on banana leaves and take it to the farmland and put it in the centre. This is meant for birds, animals, insects, etc. The family cannot eat kheer before it is kept on the paddy field. A very rich and symbolic relation is constructed with all the realms of nature.

In fact a detailed anthropological as well as philosophical research should be conducted to capture the diverse and innovative practices of the people in Sangkranti. The purpose of this article is to highlight that need with the warning that there is no so-called 'fixed' tradition and no homogeneity in cultural practices that can be identified as 'Bangali'. Cultures and traditions are always changing and evolving. We should rather rediscover our diversity and shun all kinds of stereotyping and prejudices and free ourselves from the cultural politics of identities.

Nevertheless there are certain principles that are fascinating and extremely important for our survival and prosperity. We need to highlight those principles and celebrate them as the conditions of our life and lifestyles in order to rebuild ourselves as a strong political community cognizant of our diverse cultural practices. From the various practices I am familiar with, I identify the following principles. These are:

- i. Celebrating the preservation of biodiversity through collection and cooking of 14 different shaks or leafy vegetables. The number 14 is symbolic; it indeed expresses the intention that the uncultivated food sources are conserved and we are preserving our biodiversity. Collection of 14 uncultivated shaks should not be difficult in a country rich in biodiversity.
- ii. Consumption of drought-resistant cereals is important, particularly because they are not our staples. Nevertheless they are extremely important in difficult times.
- iii. Consumption of bitter food is important for good health. Chaitra or mid-April is hot, therefore eating bitter herbs is good for health and prevents diseases.
- iv. Drinking sherbet made of green mango, and eating yoghurt, cheera, chhatu helps to ensure diversity in food and food security for our people.
- v. We must strictly avoid all meat, in order to celebrate the sanctity of life, at least for a day or two. Consumption of greens also symbolises that we are closer to sun. The greens are the source

of energy transformed by the plants with the help of the sun by photo-synthesis.

As long as we can generate principles from diverse practices, we can redesign our festivals that are appropriate for our time. I do not believe in traditions, but only in the future. I want to translate the 'past' or the 'tradition' to create a happy future. I am not against people celebrating Bangla Nababarsha and doing so in their own manner. However, we should rather regard the day as the continuation of the celebration of sangkranti and avoid copying the celebrations of New Year's Day. Festivity is extremely important for our familial, social and political life. The grandeur of the rich and diversified cultural practices of the people will be a source of tremendous energy for our rise as a strong political community.

Let's celebrate Chaitra Sangkranti and re-invent our festivals that can re-unite us on a diverse cultural plane where everyone is invited with innovating ideas.

<http://www.newagebd.com/2006/apr/14/pb06/celebration.html>

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