

Faith Culture National Identity & Pluralism

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In a recent cultural function organized by CNC – Center for National Culture to observe the Bengali New Year’s Day, Pahala Baishak, one speaker raised a very pertinent question: How to observe Pahala Baishak without being submerged into the alien culture? He regretted that in the function to observe Pahala Baishak such items are being introduced that are foreign to Muslim belief, faith and identity and against the very spirit of Muslim culture and tradition. The speaker highlighted the core differences that exist between Bengali Muslims and other ethnic and religious communities.

Instead of making uproar over the infiltration of foreign culture, the solution lies in making our people aware of the negative influence of such penetration in our society and spreading the fundamental teaching of Islam among the general masses. We have to educate people so that they themselves become aware of what is needed to be done and what should be avoided in the cultural arena. We have to develop filter by which people can identify what contradicts essentially with our faith, culture, tradition and Muslim identity. Such filter, among others, should include the customary standard of monotheism and should scrupulously avoid shirk, associating partners with God and help Muslims to avoid fahasha and munkar, harmful and evil practices. It is not enough to say that the procession that is brought out from Charukala Institute Bangladesh with mask of animals during Pahala Baishak festivals represent Bengali Hindu religious symbols, we have to exactly identify which particular element of the Pahala Baishak festival does not conform to the Muslim faith and culture. It would be befitting if we could draw parallel pictures identifying which particular item of the Pahala Baishak exactly represent the Bengali Hindu religious symbols and contradicts which particular symbols of Bengali Muslim life. At the same time it is desired that we develop positive cultural programs on every festivals and occasions.

The other issue discussed during the observance of the Pahala Baishak was bidah, innovation entangled and intertwined with the performance of the various functions of Pahala Baishak. No doubt this needs careful reflection but we must at the same time be cautious not to identify every new cultural performance as bidah or innovation as that would make our life difficult. We must not err in this respect like our predecessors. It is wrong to think that Islam stands against anything new or invented classifying it under the name of bidah. Prof. Dr. Yusuf Al Qaradawi, Dean of the Faculty of Shariah and Islamic Studies, Qatar University, while discussing bidah-innovation stated: In fact, bidah is what is invented in matters of a purely religious nature, such as creed and worship and their branches; while the changing matter of life such as norms, traditions, customs and administrative, social, cultural and political practices are not to be regarded at all as bidah [Prof. Dr. Yusuf Al Qaradawi,

Priorities of the Islamic Movement in the Coming Phase, Awakening Publications, U. K., 2000, pp 158-159].

Earlier Bangladesh scholars like Moulana Abdur Rahim in his book 'Sunnat O Bidat' classified birthday celebration as bidah-innovation but eminent scholar Adil Salahi questioned this ruling and opined that birthday celebration as such cannot be bidah-innovation. He found nothing wrong in the observance of birthday celebration. He viewed that if in the observance of birthday celebration there is no cultural element which is in conflict with the ever lasting principles of Islam, core identity of Muslims and things which are as such forbidden under shariah like drinking of alcohol, birthday observance cannot be bidah-innovation or its observance cannot be considered as forbidden.

Another question raised in the function to observe Pahala Baishak is whether we can attend the cultural and religious festivals of another religious community without participating in it or without become part of it. In Islam it is permissible to visit non-Muslim neighbors who are sick and stand by their pain and sorrow as also during their moments of pleasure and happiness. I believe there is no harm in togetherness and expressing solidarity on such occasion.

One important issue discussed in the festival to observe Pahala Baishak is how to make a speech or write a literary piece without hurting the sentiment any other community. In reply to a speech by Syed Nawab Ali Chowdhury at the Muslim Educational Conference in 1900 in which he narrated how Muslim life and culture have been badly colored in the Bengali literature, Rabindranath Tagore regretted the way Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya depicted Muslim life in his works and hoped that Muslim writers when contributing in the Bengali literature will not repeat the mistakes committed by others and shall not hurt the Bangali Hindu readers [Prof. Dr. Bhuiyan Iqbal, Rabindranath O Musalaman Samaj, Prothoma Prokashan, Dhaka, May 2010, pp 147-149]. We have to learn how to use words without hurting others. This is important to build up a united and cohesive nation.

In that function to observe the Bengali New Year's Day it was pointed out that communalism is the historic contribution of British rule of the subcontinent. I think it is an easy way to explaining subjects. Rabindranath while discussing Hindu-Muslim hitch with Poet Jasimuddin observed that those who say that communalism is the outcome of the British they really evade the issue [Jasimuddin, Rabindrasmriti in Prof. Dr. Bhuiyan Iqbal's Rabindranath O Musalaman Samaj, Prothoma Prokashan, Dhaka, May 2010, p 327].

On another occasion when scientist Dr. Muhammad Kudrat-e-Khoda requested poet Rabindranath to write more on Hindu-Muslim amity, the Nobel Prize winner litterateur replied that "such harmony is not possible". Rabindranath told Kudrat-e-Khoda: "You don't know Hindu society as much as I know" [Dr. Muhammad Kudrat-e-Khoda, Kabismriti in Prof. Dr. Bhuiyan Iqbal's Rabindranath O Musalaman Samaj, Prothoma Prokashan, Dhaka, May 2010, pp 360-361]

If communalism is the contribution of the British Raj, why then there is still communal disturbances in India after the departure of the British. I think communalism is inherent in our mindset. If there is no mistrust or tension between the two communities why the majority Hindu community did not accept the constitutional arrangement of groupings of the British Indian provinces in which Muslims were majority as proposed by the British colonial power in 1946 that would have protected the interest of the minority Muslim community or why the majority Bengali Hindus of West Bengal opposed the creation of the separate province of East Bengal in 1906 that was to protect the interest of the people of this region whose majority was Bengali Muslims. If communalism is not inherent in the state of mind of Bengali Hindus of West Bengal why did they oppose the establishment of Dhaka University when the declaration was made by the British Imperial power to this effect in 1912, more so when Dhaka University was to be established in predominantly Muslim East Bengal, now Bangladesh, for the progress of the backward Muslims of the region.

Thus it is manifested that the mistrust between the two communities, Bengali Muslims and Bengali Hindus, is innate and inherent and there is no meaning in blaming the British after so many years. The British during the colonial rule have committed injustice and wrong but blaming them now is meaningless. We have to build confidence among two communities and one way of doing that is interfaith dialogue. In this regard the leaders of two communities, political, social, cultural and religious have great role to play. Only by building confidence we can built up a peaceful, prosperous, multicultural and pluralist Bangladesh. *

*The article is the summary of the speech delivered at the function to observe Pahala Baishak on Monday 11 April 2011 organized by the Center for National Culture - CNC.

