

# What do we celebrate when we celebrate 'special' days?



SUSHMITA S. PREETHA

**W**E [middle class] Bangladeshis seem to have mastered the art of "observing", "celebrating" and "commemorating" days, while skillfully circumventing what the day actually stands for. It's the new trend, you see. We go all out to mark the special occasion -- embellishing ourselves in the "colours" of the day, putting up cover photos, selfies and FB statuses, hosting talk shows and seminars, printing special supplements in our respective newspapers, giving grandiloquent and self-righteous speeches about the solemn significance of the day, and making catchy advertisements and themed products to attract an ever-so-hip audience. But when it comes to actually dissecting the true meaning of the given day, of historicising the said event and harnessing its radical potential, we are ostensibly missing in action. We are quite happy, thank you very much, to superficially engage with an issue and then sweep it under the rug as soon as the day is over.

Take Ekushey, for instance. Come every February, there's no end to our syrupy-slushy gushing in proclaiming the grandeur of our language, Bangla, and in lamenting the loss of pride in our mother tongue. Forget that for the rest of the year we are content basking in the remnants of our colonial legacy, practicing English in the courts and instituting a highly hierarchical education system that privileges those who can transact in the valuable currency, English. Forget

that many of us are oblivious of the implications of being unable to complete a whole sentence in Bangla, even though we have spent our whole lives here, and that our shelves, if filled with books in the first place, do not reflect the rich literary, philosophical and theoretical tradition of the country. Forget that we still hold those who can speak in American or British accents in awe, while mocking those who speak in "broken" or Bangladeshi English. Forget that we play exclusively Hindi or English music in the lounges, supermarkets and restaurants -- except, of course, on Feb 21 -- and compose our signboards in English, even if and when it makes no sense to do so.

We are quite content to keep the Ekushey celebrations limited to wearing black and white attire on the given day and, if time and traffic permits, placing wreaths in the Shaheed Minar. Somehow, we have managed to make Ekushey a strictly middle-class affair, failing to analyse the ways in which our current language policies (or lack thereof) and even our celebrations narrowly define national belonging and exclude those on the "margins." Somehow, in our haste to uphold the *chetona of Ekushey*, we fail to see the parallel between Pakisanis imposing their language on us, and us imposing Bangla on the non-Bangla speaking communities in our country, robbing them of their right to speak and be educated in their mother tongue. We remain willfully oblivious of the ways in which history repeats itself, as tragedy and farce all in one.

And so, in the very month of February, a writer gets hacked to death and a whole year passes -- not enough time for any real progress into the killing, but enough time, apparently, for four

more freethinkers, including his publisher, to be murdered; for his whole life's work to be erased from the hallowed grounds of the illustrious book fair; for cracking down on those who dare raise unmentionable questions. But what does freedom of expression have to do with *chetona of Ekushey* anyway, right? And so, not too far from the very place where Avijit was killed, we sip our Nescafé in silence and buy some book of apolitical jokes or cheap love poems, oblivious that another publisher was picked up, and his store shut down by the police, reportedly following allegations of "hurt sentiments" by none other than the infamous *Basher Kella*, Jamaat's propaganda-machine. It might be the month of Ekushey, but we know better by now than to grumble about the state's confusing and/or coercive actions...

But enough about Ekushey. February is over, after all, and our attention span is already wavering. Let's get into gear to celebrate International Women's Day on March 8; let's don our purple sarees and hope that the couple of inches earmarked to talk about "women's issues" in the front page of newspapers do not get subsumed by glossy half-page ads of beauty products claiming to uphold women's rights through ensuring fairer skin, silky straight hair, and alluring fragrance. Don't sweat (sweating is unladylike -- there's a myriad of products to help you smell like a freshly-plucked flower) that for the rest of the year the media outlets will keep on using images of skimpily-clad, heavily made-up women as click-baits to lure an audience bored by news of violence against women, wage gap, gender disparity in political representation, and systematic violations in the workplace. Don't fret that the countless seminars, vigils and

talks organised on that day will continue to advocate a reductive, NGOised, neoliberal, vision of women's empowerment that doesn't threaten patriarchy or capitalism, but makes oppression palatable, even marketable. Don't worry that the day will nonetheless celebrate the middle-class woman, and women's rights as seen through her privileged eyes. Don't bother, really, to historicise and politicise the International Women's Day as a day to demand political, social and economic emancipation -- be content to celebrate your "womanhood" while remaining as far as possible from the ever-so-threatening F-word (feminism).

Then, when March 26, rolls around, we will see no conflict of *muktijuddher chetona* with shrinking democratic spaces, increasing intolerance and religious extremism, rising income inequality and corporate plunder in the country. We will lose no sleep wondering how far we have strayed from the path of justice and emancipation as envisioned prior to and during the Liberation War; rather we'll shamelessly threaten dissenters who dare remind us of the trail left behind. We'll carry on looting our national resources, raping the women and children, terrorising the adivasis and marginalised communities and conducting any and all anti-liberation activities, but when it's March 26, our voice will be the loudest in brazenly proclaiming that we are the upholders of the sacrifices of millions.

What we really celebrate when we "celebrate" special days is our collective myopia -- an inability to look beyond what's on the surface.

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The writer is a journalist and activist.

## The potential contenders

### Trump and Clinton appear to be heading towards the final US election confrontation

ASHAUQUE SWAPAN

**T**HERE'S still some way to go, but it appears that real estate tycoon Donald J. Trump and former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton are on their way to becoming their party's nominees in the upcoming US presidential elections in November.

Trump, an orange-haired, potty-mouthed, loose cannon of a presidential candidate, could well become the Republican Party's nominee after a commanding performance in Republican primaries on March 1.

Take that, you pooh-poohing political pundits! Republican establishment types, quit wringing your hands and deal with it.

The Trump juggernaut -- or trainwreck, depending on your point of view -- crashed through a slew of Republican primaries with overwhelming force. He handily won in seven states, often by substantial margins. Texas Senator Ted Cruz won in his own state as well as Oklahoma, and Florida Senator Mario Rubio won his first state in Minnesota.

Clinton, with an air of finality, rode on her extraordinary popularity among African-Americans to become the prohibitive frontrunner in the race for the Democratic nomination. Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, the genial, avuncular grassroots populist, made a credible showing, winning in four states. But Clinton's massive seven-state victory pretty much means that the writing is on the wall.

The Clinton campaign's success was already augured by her previous overwhelming win in South Carolina, also thanks to the African-American community. Her victory in that state must have been sweet vindication, because almost eight years ago, she lost decisively to a young, precocious one-term senator from Illinois -- Barack Obama. That loss, ironically enough, was also powered by African-Americans.

The ties of friendship between the Clintons and the African-American community go back decades. In South Carolina, African-Americans voted for Clinton over Sanders by a mind-boggling 8-2 margin, thereby underscoring the

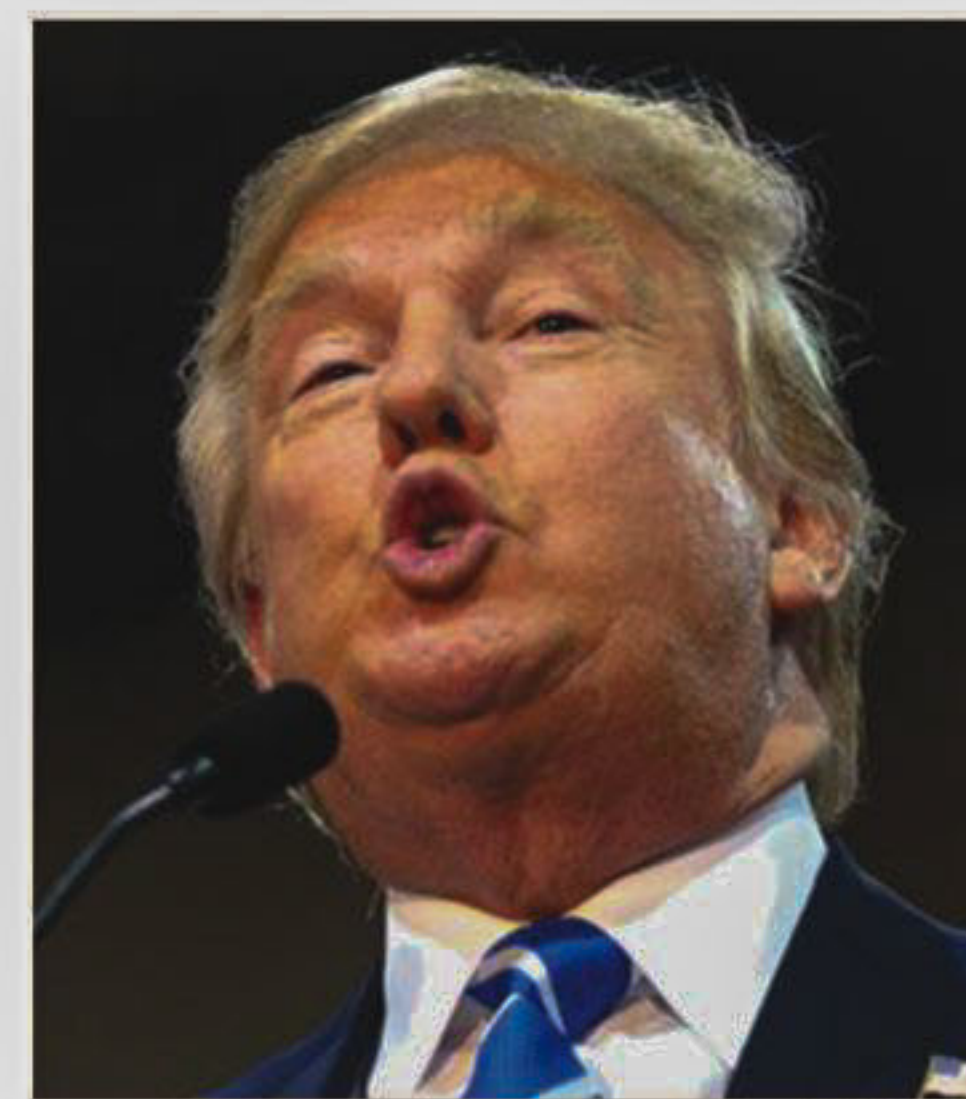
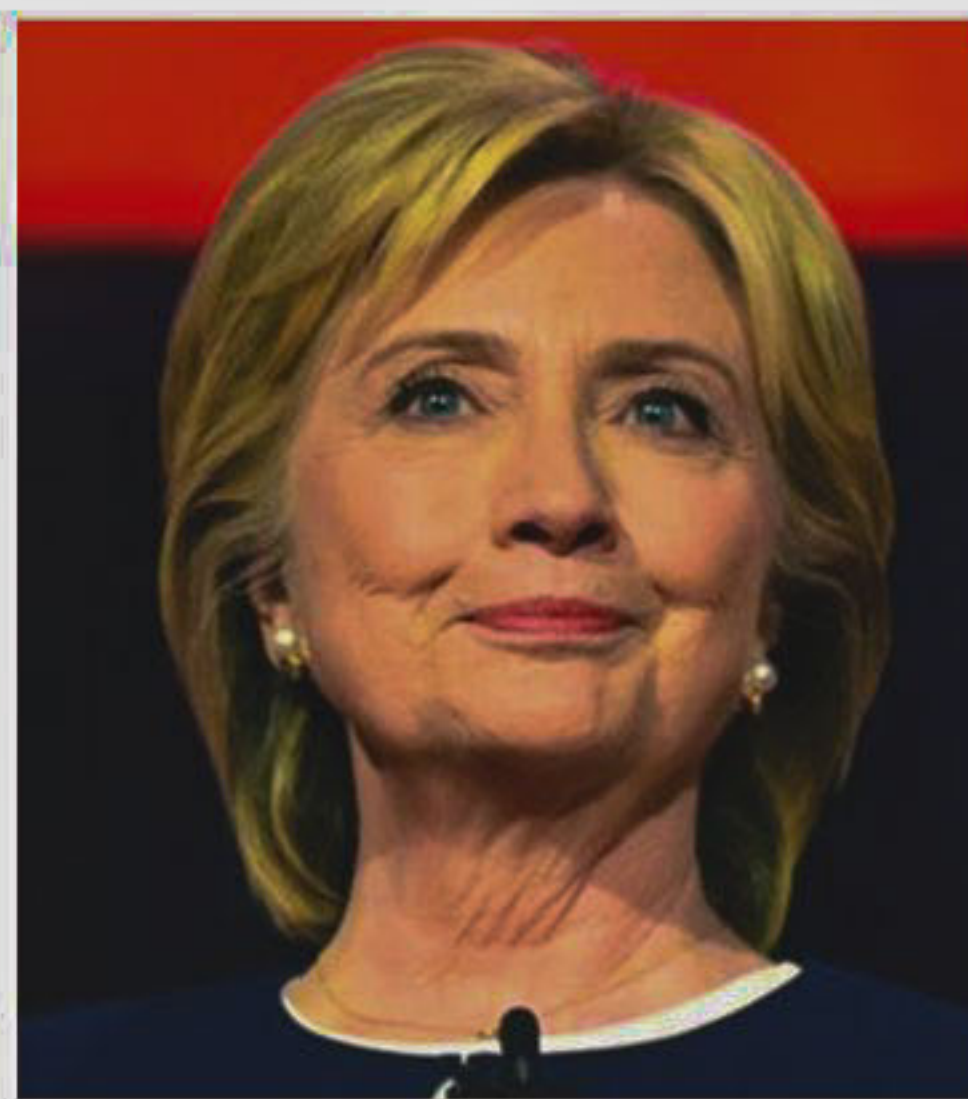


PHOTO:AFP

deep affection and regard for Clinton. This has helped her in the March 1 primaries, which included many southern states with high numbers of minority voters. Sanders' achilles' heel -- his inability to get his message to resonate beyond white voters -- was abundantly clear.

That said, in this classic David vs. Goliath fight, where Clinton has the full backing of the party and a lopsided financial advantage, Sanders has managed to bring the battle to Clinton by an admirable grassroots fundraising effort, thanks to a resonant critique of a grossly unequal economic system.

The odds remain steep for Sanders, but his single-minded focus has forced the Democratic Party to take the issue of economic inequality seriously. The party has benefited from the primary contest, which has forced Clinton to hone her skills, and yet it has been remarkably free of rancour, thanks to the mostly civil and substantive political debate.

The Republican primaries, on the other hand, have become a three-ring circus, plagued by intra-party schisms that threaten to tear the party apart.

The centre of all the action is the narcissistic Trump. Addressing massive, boisterous rallies, showing up all the time on television, and merrily

taking aim at his adversaries on Twitter, Trump is having the time of his life. Trump has called Senator Rubio a "lightweight" and "little," Senator Cruz "nasty" and a "liar," in attacks that have more in common with a kindergarten playground brawl than a political debate.

The latest Republican debate and subsequent war of words descended to the level of the gutter. Trump got into acrimonious arguments with Cruz and Rubio during the debate, and as is his habit, the feud quickly degenerated into name calling. Trump called Rubio a "choker" and Cruz a "liar." The following day, Rubio retaliated by making coarse and lewd references to Trump, with the atmosphere more reminiscent of a professional wrestling contest than a race to choose the nominee for a presidential election.

Republican Party elders are aghast and conservative policymakers are appalled.

US Senate Majority Whip John Cornyn "raised serious concerns about Donald Trump's surging presidential bid," CNN reported. "We can't have a nominee be an albatross around the down-ballot races," the Republican from Texas said.

US Senator Ben Sasse of Nebraska has declared that he won't vote for Trump if he is the nominee.

Former New Jersey Governor Christie Todd Whitman, a Republican, agrees.

Yet Trump has been savvy in garnering support for himself. Firebrand anti-immigrant Senator Jeff Sessions of Alabama has backed him, as has New Jersey Governor Chris Christie and Maine Governor Paul LePage.

The time of reckoning has arrived for Trump's adversaries, and the prospects look especially grim.

"The Republicans seem to be reeling, unable or unwilling to comprehend that a shady bombastic liar is hardening the image of their party as a symbol of intolerance and division," The New York Times said in a scathing editorial.

The results of the March 1 primary have done little to resolve the matter. Cruz's victories in two states and Rubio's win in one state mean both will likely remain in the race, as will Ohio Governor John Kasich. This will make it very difficult for any of them to take on Trump as they divide the anti-Trump vote.

If Trump does indeed become the Republican Party's nominee, will he get elected in November?

For many who are terrified at the prospect, baseball writer, historian, and statistician Bill James offers hope.

"I don't think that Trump can win, frankly, because I don't think there are enough morons to elect him," James wrote in a recent blog. "A certain percentage of the American public is just morons; that's the way it is. When you divide the public in two, then divide the voters in one of those halves among five candidates or more, a candidate can win by dominating the moron vote because it only takes about one-seventh of the total population to take the 'lead' under those circumstances."


But in a general election, James wrote that "when you're talking about needing 51 percent of the whole population, rather than needing 30 percent of half of the population, you run out of morons. I hope we will."

It is safe to say that this hope is widely shared.

The writer has been a reporter and an editor for the weekly California-based newspaper India-West for over 25 years.

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**QUOTABLE Quote**



**MAHMOUD DARWISH**  
Palestinian poet and author

Where can I free myself of the homeland in my body?

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- Hindu god of destruction
- Wrong
- Tax cheat's worry
- Jousting weapon
- Theater spot, for one
- Old card game
- Memorable time
- Turn bad
- Board the Limited
- Brewpub product
- Work unit
- Flag feature
- Brief job
- Gardeners, at times
- Circus setting
- Silent
- Little laborer
- Gets smarter
- Purpose
- Toward the stern
- One--million
- Red-eye, for example
- Sports shoe feature
- Comic Kovacs
- Grazing groups

**DOWN**

- Work breaks
- Dark fur
- Cheboygan's lake
- Knucklehead
- Bookie's charge
- Basically
- Poe's middle name
- Avril follower
- Thankless person
- Learned sort
- Hunting dogs
- Math course
- Monthly bill
- One or more
- True-blue
- Kind of strength
- Whole number
- Go-getter
- Tick off
- Bulb units
- Zodiac dozen
- Not struck
- Noggins
- Possessed
- Rage

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

S	C	R	A	M	A	R	C	S	
T	O	A	D	S	W	A	R	M	S
E	M	M	A	S	I	M	O	U	T
E	B	B	T	I	S	O	D	E	
L	O	O	S	E	C	H	A	N	G
			I	R	E	L	A	N	G
B	A	D	L	I	B	I	R	D	S
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I	D	A	H	O	K	I	T	E	S
R	E	M	I	T	E	V	E	N	T
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**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker



**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott

