

## Shubho Naboborsho

Let's celebrate our unity and uniqueness

THE first day of the Bangla calendar is an occasion of festivity imbued with the spirit of unity among diversity. This is also a time to celebrate our pastoral traditions where lies all the hallmarks of our distinctive identity as a nation.

The universal appeal of Pahela Baishakh unites all the citizens of Bangladesh across class, race and religion. Along with Bangalis, innumerable indigenous communities of the country celebrate this occasion with their distinct colour and verve. It is also a recognition of tolerance of others and difference of opinion that is embedded in our culture. Unfortunately, there is a vested group who are trying to subvert the secular spirit of the festival. We have seen their heinous attempts to foil the occasion. But Bangladeshi people have bravely encountered these odds and celebrate the day with renewed vigour. On this happy day, we mark a fresh start leaving behind all that is negative and revitalise ourselves with positivity and optimism.

As a nation we are yet to overcome the impediments that confront us such as the political divide, poverty, discrimination against women, religious extremism and climate change. Pahela Baishakh inspires us to come together, cutting across our differences, prejudices and parochial interests. Let's reclaim our hold on our peaceful tradition and celebrate the strength of Bangladesh.

## Rise in child suicide bombers

The world must unite to stop it

A new report published by United Nations Children's Education Fund (UNICEF) portrays a disturbing picture of how children are being recruited by Islamist movements in Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger and being used as suicide bombers. This is a very sad narrative on how the world is treating its children. Even more disturbing is the fact that three quarters of the children involved in bombings are girls. They are being forcibly taken from their homes by terrorist outfits and forced into combat of the deadliest kind. No child wants to go into this on his or her own, rather it is the adult with a twisted sense of religious commitment who is merely using them as cannon fodder to fulfil his own terrorist agenda.

The precious lives of children are being treated cheaply, because they are easily influenced and can be moulded more easily than adults. This is a blot on civilisation. Whereas we are supposed to nurture them in their formative years, instead we are cutting short their life by compelling them into acts which can have only one outcome. The collective conscience of the world will have to rise together to put a stop to this gruesome practice. This will not be the first time that the nations of the world have spoken out in one voice to protect the rights of children; we have seen political differences set aside to help stop the recruitment of child soldiers in Liberia. The time has arrived to repeat that gesture to save the lives of innocent children.

## COMMENTS

**"Locals were kept in dark about power plant"**  
(April 13, 2016)

Allama Iqbal

Big countries banned coal-fired power plants due to the environmental hazards they caused and we are now launching them!

Hasan Masud

This seems to be a terrible form of manipulation from the company's end. Well done, *The Daily Star*, for finding and publishing the real picture.

**"Diarrhoea cases soar amid heat"**  
(April 13, 2016)

Bohurupi Tas

We hope people afflicted with this will recover soon.

# Melay Jairey and Baishakhi thoughts

MAQSOODUL HAQUE

EVERY Bangla Naboborsho or Bangali New Year, I am deluged with requests for interviews by newspapers, periodicals and television channels to discuss the background and thought process that went into creation of my song *Melay Jairey* ("Let's go to the fair"). This is a song that I wrote, composed and sang in 1988, which was published in the 1990 album *Mela* by my erstwhile band, Feedback. The song in its original form survives in the public domain, even after 26 staggering years, placing it in the category of a classic.

As a child in the late 60s, I would accompany my parents on many Baishakh celebrations. Those were the times when we were East Pakistan, and the Bangla language, with its rich cultural heritage, was being savaged by the powers that be as 'un-Islamic'. The Ramna Park, where the earliest celebrations were arranged by Chhayanaut, was the first citadel of cultural resistance against Pakistan, the first attempts at showcasing our rich, ancient, secular culture whose roots were in the boondocks of rural Bengal. About a thousand to fifteen hundred like-minded and conscious individuals would get together with their families and friends, a mutual admiration society of sorts, because the faces - starting from organisers to artists to musicians to the audience - were those that we were all familiar and comfortable with.

The Ramna Park took on the aura of a picnic venue, and we children were more interested in playing games in the vast open spaces while our parents took on the rigours of songs by Tagore (which in itself was 'subversive' as Pakistan had banned his work), Nazrul and other cultural luminaries, folk musicians, dances and poetry recitals, little of which we understood. However, the tokenistic air of freedom in the park from the clutches of oppression, the freedom to be who we were, if only for a day, took on different emotional dimensions. As children, we could hardly relate to these, but the fond memories left strong and undeniable imprints on our impressionable minds.

Not unsurprisingly, the yearly event at Ramna, post the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, Pahela Baishakh turned into a mass celebration with Chhayanaut, taking centre stage in playing a pivotal cultural role in our nation's struggle for emancipation. Yet, Bangla



PHOTO: ATL AAKASH

New Year celebrations in the years following lacked *joie de vivre* and turned out to be very serious, unemotional and boring affairs with Tagore sung unemotionally, eyes closed, nose flared and no smiles or merriment visible in the vicinity. More importantly, no one was allowed to even clap, as it was considered a taboo unofficially!

However, by the mid-seventies, the Baishakh celebrations at Ramna no longer resembled a cultural event, it took on the aura of a carnival - with hundreds upon thousands of people from all sections of society joining in. Come the 90s, and the boisterous Mongol Shobhajatra by the students of the Institute of Fine Arts heralded the beginning of the Bangladeshi version of Mardi Gras.

Meanwhile, from a child I matured to a gangly teenager, much to the shock of my parents and Chhayanaut elders, with exposure to a rich dosage of American and European music or "western culture". Long hair, t-shirts, torn and dirty Levis or Wrangler jeans, arrogance in attitude bordering on irreverence to authority and 'control' - the global symbols of the post-Woodstock generation would creep into my persona as much as the rest of my generation. Through its own strength, Bangla rock music had found its rightful place in Bangla culture by mid-70s. Independence from Pakistan in 1971 meant that we had moved away from being

a 'resistance culture' to one of liberation that resonated with what it meant to be 'global'. Our 'seniors' were not amused!

*Melay Jairey* was just a few years in the making - and was in fact born as a revolt against the narrow tunnel vision of 'Bangali culture'. The song was a challenge to authority; In attitude and merriment, celebrating the Bangla New Year, I felt, did not have to be any different from the Gregorian New Year's Eve. Fun and frolic is not alien to the Bangali psyche, not at least in rural Bangladesh where the majority of our population lives, was my justification. The rest is history.

On technical aspects, the song carved the Baishakhi soundscape and demonstrated monumental advancement in Bangladeshi music. All four senses are activated i.e. hearing - with the intro music of dhak, dhol, ektara, mandira, dotara, flute, as much as western brass instruments; sight - with lyrics visualising strong colours of Baishakh flora and fauna - polish, shimul, bashonti sarees, khopa (hair bun) and the strong sun as the Mangal Shobhajatra ensues; smell - with urban women's choice of 'foreign perfumes' over jasmine flowers, while they romanced! The sense of touch comes in the dola or groove that everybody could dance to. The only sense deliberately not represented in the song is taste - as the poor in Bangladesh, who are the original stakeholders of the festival, sometimes

cannot afford a square meal even on the first day of the year.

And yes, there was a warning about 'bokhate cheley' or abject 'ruffians' who would harass women on Pahela Baishakh. Back in the 90s, this was the first public take by anyone on issues like gender sensitivity, 'eve teasing' or sexual harassment, when the terms were not even in currency. While they may have today become issues of serious concern, ironically in 1993 - three years after the song was released - we read the first report of women being harassed in public during the festival! Percolating further, nothing left me more disturbed, distressed and depressed than the mass harassment of women during Pahela Baishakh celebrations in 2015.

That said - the song *Melay Jairey's* success, above all, is credited to those that have heard it, those who have loved it and made it a part of our cultural heritage, and especially those who will continue in the belief that this is the time of the year when we wash away all our negativities, all our fears, inhibitions and doubts - and usher in the positives. These are the munificence that makes us Bangalis for all the right reasons, a proud race that places itself among the brightest, most tolerant and intelligent of world's cultures.

The writer is a Dhaka based, jazz-rock fusion musician, poet, writer, Baul researcher and cultural activist.

## PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

### SECTION 377

# An archaic, discriminatory law

## AWAKENING INDIA



SHASHI THAROOR

SIXTY-SIX years after adopting one of the world's most liberal constitutions, India is being convulsed by a searing debate over a colonial-era provision in

its penal code, Section 377, which criminalises "whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman, or animal." Though not widely used - there were 578 arrests under Section 377 last year - the law is a tool for the harassment, persecution, and blackmail of sexual minorities within India. It must be changed.

Beyond forcing millions of gay men and women to live in fear and secrecy, Section 377 has undermined HIV-prevention efforts and contributed to depression and suicides. A 2014 study by the World Bank revealed that India suffers a loss of between 0.1 percent and 1.7 percent of GDP because of homophobia.

The issue is not one of sex, but of freedom. By giving the state the authority to control what Indian adults do, consensually, in their bedrooms, Section 377 violates the constitutional rights to dignity, privacy, and equality enshrined in Articles 14, 15, and 21, respectively. As the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has observed, "The criminalisation of gay behavior goes not only against fundamental human rights, but it also

works sharply against the enhancement of human freedoms in terms of which the progress of human civilization can be judged."

In the period after a liberal Delhi High Court struck down Section 377 in 2009, the heavens did not fall; Indian society did not collapse. Yet bigots petitioned to reverse that decision, ultimately succeeding in turning back the clock for gay rights in India in 2013, when the Supreme Court overturned the High Court's decision.

Like many Indians, I found the Supreme Court's 2013 ruling antithetical to India's commitment to pluralism and democracy, which provides for the embrace of a multitude of identities, including those based on sexual orientation. So, last December, I sought to introduce a bill that would have amended Section 377 and decriminalised all consensual sex between adults, irrespective of their gender and sexuality.

A vocal section of homophobes in the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) voted overwhelmingly against the bill's introduction, so that no pragmatic debate on the bill's merits could take place. The same thing happened when I tried again in March. Sneering comments were made about my alleged personal interest in the bill, to which I responded that one does not need to be a cow to defend the rights of animals.

The BJP's vote is incongruous on several levels, but most glaringly in its rejection of millennia of Indian practice in favour of a British colonial law (which the British themselves have outgrown). The Indian ethos toward sexual difference has historically been liberal, with neither mythology nor history

revealing the persecution or prosecution of sexual heterodoxy. In fact, the Hindu epics are dotted with characters like Shikhandi in the Mahabharata, who was born female and became male; many Hindus venerate the half-man, half-woman Ardhanarishvara; and temple sculptures across India depict homosexual acts. Yet the BJP, the party of Hindu chauvinism, chooses to ignore this Hindu tradition.

In its 2013 judgment, the Supreme Court said that legislators, not judges, must decide the fate of Section 377. Unfortunately, thanks to the prejudices of a few dozen vocal and motivated BJP members, Parliament is not up to the task. Indeed, legislative recourse for the injustice of Section 377 may not be available as long as the BJP is in power.

But there is still hope for relief through India's judicial process. The Supreme Court has now agreed to undertake a "curative review" of its 2013 decision. Such a review could lead it to repeal Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code.

While I have been unsuccessful in my efforts to amend Section 377 through legislative channels, I remain committed to human rights, to keeping the government out of our bedrooms, and to defending Indian pluralism. As we await the Supreme Court's review, we can and must continue to seek justice for India's minorities in the court of public opinion. To this end, I have circulated a petition, with the goal of highlighting for Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party that public sentiment has moved beyond the 19th century. With 65,000 people having already signed, the message is clear.

But, in terms of real change in this area, my hopes rest with the judiciary, rather than the government. After all, whereas change via legislation would require political courage - a quality sorely lacking in the current Indian government - the judiciary is not hampered by such considerations.

The good news is that India's Supreme Court has an exemplary record of interpreting statutes in a way that expands human rights in the country. The curative review raises hope that it will do so again, creating an India in which the law embodies constitutional values of privacy, equality, dignity, and non-discrimination for all citizens.

The alternative - allowing Indian law to continue to serve as an iron cage for some of our people - would directly undermine the freedom of identity and expression that constitutes the backbone of Indian democracy. What is more, it would leave India out of step with much of the rest of the international community, a country embarrassed before the world's other democracies.

We must demand that our Supreme Court - if not our lawmakers - affirm a pluralist India that accommodates all identities within our country. The time for change was many years ago. But it is never too late to do the right thing. I hope that the Supreme Court is listening.

The writer, a former UN under-secretary-general and former Indian Minister of State for External Affairs and Minister of State for Human Resource Development, is currently Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs and an MP for the Indian National Congress.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### No load-shedding, really?

Reading the news titled "No load shedding despite heat wave" (TDS, April 12, 2016) left me shocked. How can there be news on 'no load shedding' when there is shortage of electricity in my village in Naria thana, Shariatpur. We experience load shedding for up to 10 hours, and five of these hours are in the evening - the time that's most suitable for studying. Let me give you a very personal example. When I visited my village recently upon hearing of my father's illness, I learnt that his condition couldn't improve because he had high blood pressure, which refused to lower because there was no electricity at home.

Moreover, my nephews and nieces are students of secondary school, and they had to study for their exams. However, they could not concentrate on their studies, thanks to the disappearing nature of our electricity. Thus, it's not true that there is no load shedding in the country; however, one could probably say that there is little load shedding in Dhaka city but this does not hold true for remote areas of the country.

Asaduzzaman Ibrahim  
Shahidullah hall  
University of Dhaka

### Stop this mockery!

What's the meaning of Pahela Baishakh? Why do we really celebrate it? Does the celebration just entail eating hilsa fish with *panta bhat* on earthen plates? Mughal emperor Akbar introduced the tradition of celebrating Pahela Baishakh, to celebrate the closing of the annual tax collection season. However, in early 1980's, some traders started stocking hilsa fish in their cold storage of fish, and introduce the trend of Panta-Ilish (hilsa) on the streets of Mawlana Bhashani, Ramna Park and Suhrawardi Uddyan. The rich began to gather

to these places and took part in this fad, launching a new way to celebrate Pahela Baishakh. The poor, for whom the celebration was originally intended, are unable to participate in this event, because the price of hilsa fish is beyond their reach. In such circumstances, the celebration is no longer a national festival at all. It is solely a mockery of the poor. I'd like to request privileged citizens of the country to stop encouraging this practice.  
Bipul K Debnath  
Dhaka