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# A festivity of syncretic traditions

Pahela Baishakh is a paragon of national and cultural unity and a form of resistance against divisive forces

### PAHELA NOWSHIN

Pahela Baishakh is not only the country's largest secular festival but also part of a global celebration. It's part of a universal festivity of the New Year across different cultures and religions.

Amidst a global climate of heightened xenophobia and communal hatred, New Year celebrations of diverse peoples show that there still exists a space of common ground. In a world deeply polarised along religious, nationalist and racial lines, universal celebrations thwart the very idea of "us versus them" and take on renewed significance over time.

Last year, after we witnessed the deadliest terrorist attack in Bangladesh, we were faced with some disturbing new realities which to many seemed like the upshot of some sort of an identity crisis, the weakening secular foundation of our social fabric and increasing alienation of the youth. And perhaps that is why, this time

around, I am faced with a strange dilemma penning my thoughts on Pahela Baishakh and the secular, ethno-linguistic identity that Bangladesh was born out of. Where does the secular spirit of Pahela Baishakh stand in a milieu that no longer seems familiar? During times like these, what do celebrations like Pahela Baishakh mean in a land where ideological battle lines are being drawn?

Today, as we celebrate Bengali New Year 1424, I want to talk about Pahela Baishakh in a new light. That is to say, Pahela Baishakh as part of the largely secular and syncretic nature of not only Bangladesh but also New Year celebrations across the world.

The communalisation of Pahela Baishakh, in recent times, has become part of a broader ideological war. One of the most problematic narratives that have been advanced – and is gaining ground among some quarters of society – is that Pahela Baishakh is a 'Hindu tradition' that is not compatible with the 'Bangladeshi identity'. I

will not go into this very flawed, absurd logic but I will say that those who propagate these views have very little knowledge of the centuries of syncretic history of Bengal.

The roots of Pahela Baishakh, the first day of the Bengali calendar, can be traced back to the Mughal period during which Bengal was known as the 'Paradise of the Nations' due to its impressive trade and wealth. During the rule of the third Mughal Emperor Akbar, who was then at the helm of one of the most powerful empires on earth, the Islamic Hijri calendar was fused with the solar calendars to ease tax collection. Since the lunar Hijri calendar did not coincide with the agricultural cycle Akbar sought the help of his royal astrologer Aamir Fatehullah Siraji to come up with the revised calendar, originally known as Fasli San (agricultural year), so that farmers wouldn't have to pay taxes out of season. Akbar, known to have a pretty big ego, made sure to include the dates of his coronation in the revised calendar. Thus, the formula for the Bengali year is: Islamic

year of Akbar's crowning (963) + current Gregorian solar year (2017) – Gregorian solar year of Akbar's crowning (1556) = 1424.

Some historians floated the idea that Akbar's interest in theology and philosophy may have resulted in him wanting a combined calendar, but this theory didn't seem to have much credence. Another little known hypothesis attributes the development of the Bengali calendar to the King of Gaur, Sasanka because the starting date falls squarely within his reign.

It is interesting to note that the dates of Durga Puja and Kali Puja, when calculated according to the Bengali calendar, take into account the coronation of Akbar and Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) migration from Mecca to Medina (the date of the Hijra is the first year of the Bengali calendar).

Thus the 'logic' behind the divisive rhetoric surrounding Pahela Baishakh falls flat to anyone with a modicum of understanding