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of how the Bengali calendar came about. Not to mention it also ignores the complex realities of the agrarian economy of Bengal in which the Bengali calendar proved essential for agricultural tax collection, ensuring that dues are paid off by the last day of Chaitra and other economic purposes.

The Bengali calendar is a symbol of religious harmony and coexistence that has long defined this region. Not only that, celebrations of Pahela Baishakh are a reminder of our hard-earned nationhood and our collective struggle to break free from the shackles of cultural oppression.

Chhayanaut, the country's leading cultural school which has become synonymous with Pahela Baishakh celebrations, was a locus of cultural resistance during the Pakistan era. In 1961, a group of activists (including Begum Sufia Kamal and Waheedul Haq) courageously defied the ban on Rabindra sangeet that the Pakistani regime had imposed to celebrate the birth centennial of Rabindranath Tagore. That set the grounds of what Chhayanaut would eventually become decades later – an institution upholding our rich cultural heritage through the power of art.

It is not just Bangladesh of course which is in the grip of a rising tide of fundamentalism. The brands of xenophobic, extremist Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar and militant, chauvinistic Hindu nationalism in India are no less violent. These polarising forces that view 'culture' and 'religion' as mutually exclusive and impose an identity on the majority are challenged when cultural unity triumphs.

The Hindu new year festival of Vishu (which means 'equal') celebrated on the first day of the Malayali calendar in Kerala and Tulunadu region of Coastal Karnataka (where it is called Bisu) is yet another example of this. On this day, Muslims and Christians along with their Hindu neighbours don new clothes, give money to children and take part in the cultural activities of the day.



Water festival of Songkran, the Thai New Year, in Thailand.

For Malayali Hindus, the practice of 'Vishu Kani', literally translated to 'that which is seen first on Vishu', holds special significance. There is a traditional belief that whatever one sees first on that day will be a sign of what the future holds. Malayali Hindu women spend the day before setting up a tray with auspicious items – such as rice, golden lemon, coconuts, betel leaves, Hindu scriptures – to be seen the first thing in the morning of Vishu. This ceremonial preparation is considered to be the omen of good luck and prosperity.

Moving away from South and Southeast Asia, Nowruz (which means 'new day') has

been celebrated in many parts of the Middle East and Central Asia for over 3,000 years. Believed to have its roots in Zoroastrianism, a monotheistic religion founded in Iran, Nowruz is also known as the Iranian New Year or Persian New Year. A secular holiday for most celebrants, Nowruz ushers in the vernal equinox and marks the first day of spring. It is a celebration of nature's rebirth and lasts two whole weeks.

Nowruz is celebrated across borders and cultures in Afghanistan, Albania, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Kyrgyzstan, India, among others. It is one of the very few secular observances in a region (Middle East) which remains embroiled in sectarian conflicts and civil wars.

A time-honoured tradition of Nowruz is Haft-Seen (the seven seen's) which is the display of an arrangement of seven items symbolic of what one wishes to bring into the New Year. The items all start with the letter S, some of which are *samanu* (sweet pudding for affluence), *senjed* (Persian dried olive for love), and *serkeh* (vinegar for wisdom and patience). On the thirteenth day of the new year in Iran, the final ritual takes place when people spend the day picnicking with family, as part of the Sizdah Bedar ceremony, and throwing away the greenery collected for Haft-Seen.

Like Nowruz, festivities of Songkran (meaning 'transformation'), the Thai new year, transcend nations and cultures. It is celebrated by various communities in Malaysia, northeastern India, and Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. Songkran is largely known for its water festival (known as *pani khela* in Bangladesh) which is a ritual meant to display respect for water – an essential element for the agricul-

tural life of Southeast Asia. Water is poured onto statues of Buddha which represents washing away of one's sins and bringing good luck.

New Year celebrations are, for diasporas, a form of shared identity and a source of belonging to a foreign place. For example, celebrations of Pahela Baishakh of the Bangladeshi community and Sinhalese New Year of the Sri Lankan community in the United Arab Emirates are carried out with much fanfare and pomp. For these expatriates, cultural celebrations exude a feeling of 'home away from home' which are sometimes carried out with much more grandeur than back home.

Most New Year observances are seasonal harvest festivals that have agricultural roots and have over time transformed into an important marker of cultural identity. The origins of Pahela Baishakh, Vishu, Songkran, and Nowruz are related to harvest and sowing of seeds and can be traced back to astrological, agricultural and economic reasons.

Historical commonalities aside, the fact that today Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu-majority countries still come together to celebrate the New Year with similar hopes of prosperity and spiritual wellbeing is a testament to the power of shared values. Most importantly, these celebrations, at a time when extremist ideologies are making headway in both the East and the West, are a form of resistance against communal-minded provocateurs who seek to create artificial divides by promoting a false majoritarian logic.

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A tabletop arrangement of symbolic items traditionally displayed at Nowruz, the Iranian New Year.