



# The power of tolerance over bigotry

*Pahela Baishakh and other cultural and national celebrations have, over the recent past, been the targets of religious bigots and fundamentalists. Dr Perween Hasan, Vice-Chancellor, Central Women's University and former Professor, Department of Islamic History and Culture, University of Dhaka, talks to Naznin Tithi about the importance of defeating religious intolerance by continuing to celebrate our national and cultural events.*

**In the recent past, religious fundamentalists issued a fatwa against Pahela Baishakh celebrations, which is an integral part of our cultural heritage. Some even went to the extent of terming the celebrations haram. For a nation that has always cherished liberal religious beliefs, what could be the implications of such religious bigotry?**

There has been a lot of violence and loss of life in the name of religion, but stopping all traditional celebrations because of fatwas by extremists and bigots will be giving in to their demands; it will go against the fundamental rights that secular Bangladesh ensures its citizens. In Bangladesh, majority of the people are religious; majority are Muslims, but there are Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and people of other beliefs and



**Dr Perween Hasan**

For me religion is very personal, my religion is not on display for everyone to comment. We have to stop thinking that my understanding is the only one, and there is no space for anyone to express a different view. Even great religious scholars have differed in their interpretations of religious texts, so there must be tolerance of other people's views. Different views should be discussed and written about in an atmosphere where there is not just tolerance but respect for another's views.

convictions. Religious extremists are no doubt organised but very small in number, so they should not be able to dictate to a nation of 16 crore plus. Pahela Baishakh to most of us is a secular holiday and we should be able to celebrate it according to our likes and means. They are cultural not religious events.

Speaking of culture, it embraces all that we do every day in our lives: how and in what language we speak, what we eat, how we live, the kind of dwelling, how we express ourselves artistically, etc. Among other factors, culture is largely influenced by geography, environment, tradition, education and of course, religion; because those who follow any faith system try to observe its rules and rituals. To some extent religion influences how we dress, behave and what we eat.

There is a tendency to dictate what Bangali culture is or should be, but it must be remembered that there is a lot of diversity even within this culture. There are differences between urban and rural as well as between class and communities, food habits, what we wear, what we eat, how we speak. We don't listen to the same kind of music or read the same books, and many don't read at all. Moreover, culture is like a river, flowing and forever changing. There is no one stereotype of a "khanti Bangali" (pure Bangali). Let us take the example of *panta-ilish* which has become a standard of Baishakhi celebration. Although the city dweller of means eats watered rice as a

diversion from the fast food of everyday, for the village farmer there is nothing celebratory about eating *panta*. Given a choice he/she would probably opt for *polau* (aromatic rice)! There was a time when band music was considered alien to our culture (*oposanskriti*), now it is very much a part of Bangali music and our young people are wonderfully creative with it. We tend to give recipes for everything: this is Bangali, this is Islam, as if there is a formula.

There is of course a huge commercial angle to all of this: the fashion houses tell us what to wear and have successfully colour-coded everything.

**Religious fundamentalists are also propagating intolerance against other traditional Bangali events such as Ekushey February, Pahela Falgun. Is it fair to paint such national celebrations in a religious light? As a nation how do we fight religious intolerance and uphold the spirit of Bangali culture?**

The key word here is 'intolerance'. The festivals you have named are secular and are not concerned with religion. For me religion is very personal, my religion is not on display for everyone to comment. We have to stop thinking that my understanding is the only one, and there is no space for anyone to express a different view. Even great religious scholars have differed in their interpretations of religious texts, so there must be tolerance of other people's views. Different views should be discussed and written about in an atmosphere where there is not just tolerance but respect for another's views. I will celebrate Pahela Baishakh and do not think it goes against my religion. For those who think that it is not befitting Islam, let him or her refrain from celebrating, but they cannot prevent somebody from joining the celebration. Attacking or killing someone is prohibited in Islam. No religious extremist or commercial house or the nation state should tell us how to celebrate our own festivals. Unfortunately we see such intolerance of other people's views everywhere in Bangladesh, not just in the religious sphere.

**Most Muslim Bangladeshis celebrate religious and national/cultural events with the same zeal. Does religion need to**

**contradict with our cultural/national identity?**

You have asked about laying flowers on the Shaheed Minar (Language Movement martyrs' memorial), saying that extremists are saying this is forbidden. As far as I know the Quran forbids worshipping of idols and anyone besides Allah. People do not worship the Shaheed Minar, they are merely showing respect for the martyrs of the Language Movement by laying flowers on the monument as this is traditionally our way of showing respect. Again if you feel that this is wrong because it goes against the principles of your religion, then by all means refrain, but you do not have the license to hurt someone who wants to go.

There cannot be a cultural policy made by the State to dictate what our culture is.

There has been a lot of violence and loss of life in the name of religion, but stopping all traditional celebrations because of fatwas by extremists and bigots will be giving in to their demands; it will go against the fundamental rights that secular Bangladesh ensures its citizens.

There will be new trends and those will add to our cultural richness. We will go on celebrating festivals in our own way, in as many ways as possible, and that is how we will fight the extremists. We are all citizens of Bangladesh, but we can be Bangali, Chakma, Santal, or belong to any other ethnic group, speak Bangla, or any other language of our group, be Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, or belong to any other belief system, and also celebrate all our secular as well as our own religious festivals. I see no contradictions in this.