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schisms within our already deeply polarised society. I think critical thoughts, however biased or intellectually unsound, should be welcomed for the simple reason that they exist as a “reaction” which should give us an opportunity to evaluate our action. Also, such thoughts stem from genuine concerns and deserve appropriate response, the absence of which may very well mean the absence of a solid basis for the said action that has caused those concerns in the first place.

Is there really a “Bengali way” to celebrate Pahela Baishakh? Frankly, there isn't. We're too different to be alike. “Bengali way” in the sense of a single, linear way to be followed by everyone is a myth at best—and nationalist propaganda at worst. It is difficult to define because there is no single, universally accepted definition. About 98 percent of our population belongs to the Bengali ethno-linguistic group but Bangladesh is hardly ethnically homogeneous, so to speak, because of the different subgroups and deep divisions that exist within the larger ethno-linguistic group. And even then, religion plays a big part in how a certain cultural practice will be viewed, meaning even if it is accepted, its level of acceptance may vary depending on one's interpretation of it.

In Bangladesh, Muslims constitute 90.4 percent of the population while Hindus form 8.96 percent (2011 census). Defining

the identity of Bengali Muslims from a historical perspective is not simple, according to Professor Anisuzzaman, a leading scholar on Bengali identity and culture. “When we identify a group of people as Bengali Muslim, we highlight only one aspect of their self-identity. But if we observe closely, we'll see that they contain multitudes,” he said. He drew on historical documents and literary sources to present a compelling picture of the diversity of Bengali Muslims in different ages in terms of their preference for language, attire, occupation, customs, and religious and political beliefs—which made them different not only from their Hindu counterparts, but also from each other. Defining the Bengali Hindus, on the other hand, is not an easy task either because they, too, have their differences, and went through a similar process of transformation. When we single out a certain way and try to pass it off as the Bengali way, to be followed by everyone, it serves as a denial of people's diversity and, in so doing, attains an autocratic quality.

Culture is a fluid concept. The freedom to navigate the complex situation that supposedly arises from one's linguistic, national and religious identities/differences lies at the heart of any pluralistic society, although cultural hegemony drumming up support for their vision of a unidimensional identity will make you think otherwise. They will cry hoarse about the illusive “Bangaliyana,” dig out age-old customs and disparage

anyone who doesn't gravitate to them, but conveniently forget that such rigidity is an affront to those non-Bengali ethnic groups that also respect the traditional calendar and celebrate harvesting of new paddy in their own ways. The search for the Bengali way in Pahela Baishakh celebrations is, therefore, a misguided one. We need to seek unity through diversity. That being said, modern-day celebrations are a far cry from how Pahela Baishakh used to be celebrated, through simple feasts and fairs in rural areas. And the fact that it has been turned into an urban affair by people far removed from the reality of the peasant folks is an irony of the highest order.

The point I am trying to make is, Pahela Baishakh, while an integral part of the local culture and tradition, shouldn't be a cause for rifts simply because of some people's lofty idea of how to celebrate it or what the ideal Bengali way is. This, in part, also answers the questions, or reservations, about Pahela Baishakh from an Islamic perspective. Some Islamic scholars do not support celebrating Pahela Baishakh because of *Mangal Pradip*, *panta-ilish* feasts, *Mangal Shobhajatra* and other apparent Hindu influences. They mistakenly equate the spirit of Pahela Baishakh with its modern-day trappings. This, again, indicates how cultural hegemony has corrupted our understanding of Pahela Baishakh through the diffusion and popularisation of certain ways of celebration. But Pahela Baishakh is more than that. Pahela Baishakh is an idea—it

will not change although how we celebrate it will. Pahela Baishakh is a celebration of life, a renewed awareness of what we are, what we used to be, and what we can achieve if we start together. Unlike Eids or Pujas, which come with a religious tag, Pahela Baishakh is a celebration for all. So what the religious scholars need to understand is that anyone can celebrate this day in their own unique way. Even a simple, unceremonious prayer for the wellbeing of the country, or a simple feast for orphans, would mean as much as organising big public galas.

What I find interesting is the secular message behind the first *Mangal Shobhajatra* organised in Dhaka in 1989. It was meant to be a creative expression of protest by the writers-artists who organised it, as part of their movement against the autocratic regime, which used religion to stay in power. The organisers, as a protest, wanted to do something that would highlight Bengali culture which is for the people of all religions. Hence, the idea of using symbols of different traditions. It was a deliberate attempt to underscore the importance of unity through diversity. That first walk was called “Ananda Shobhajatra.” I wonder if those who object to the naming of “Mangal” Shobhajatra today would have objected to “Ananda” Shobhajatra also.

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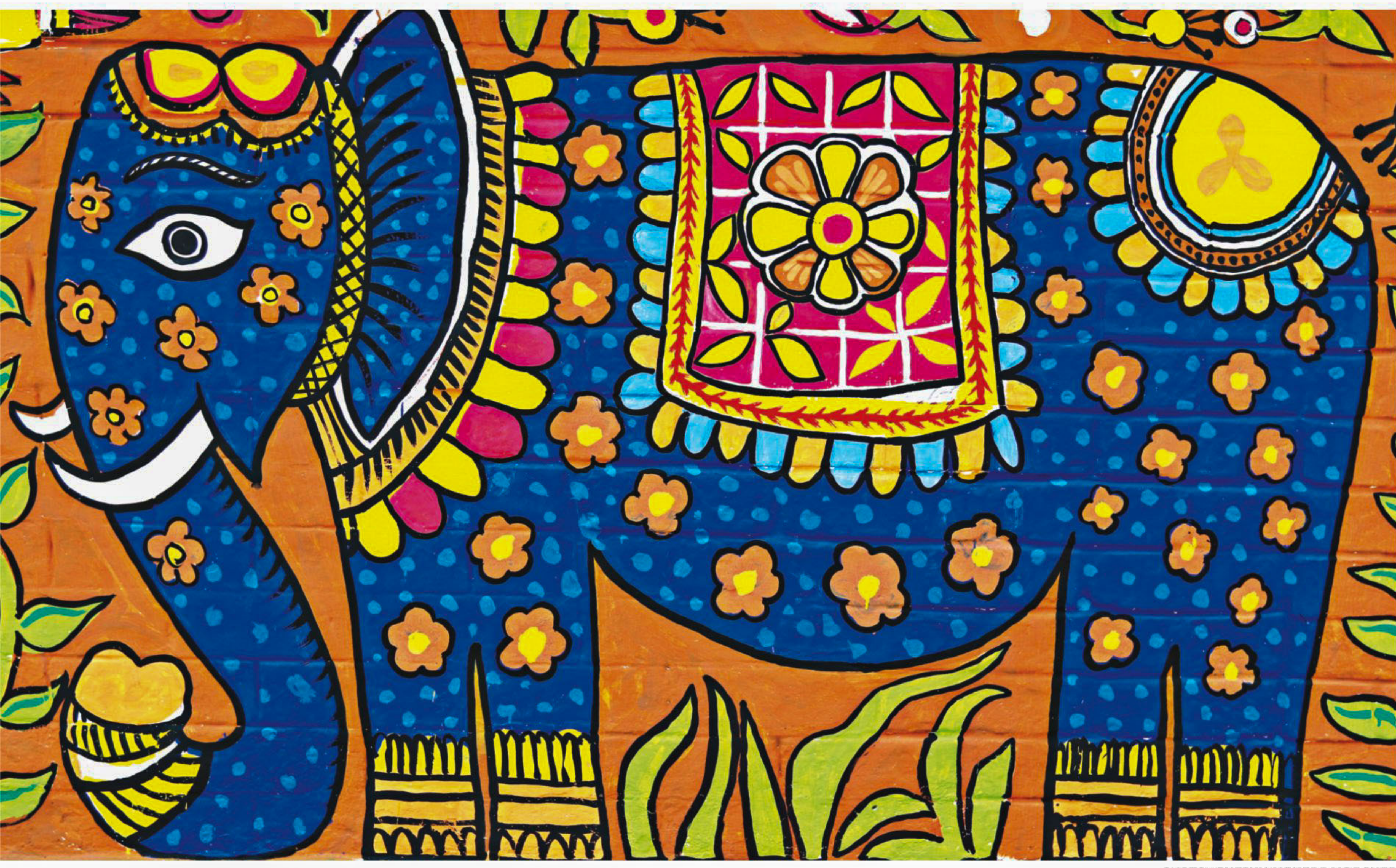


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