

Pahela Baishakh celebrates the human spirit

To be united against all odds

OUR celebrations today will be uncharacteristically muted, without the huge congregation of people in colourful attire thronging to Ramna Batamul to listen to the songs that usher in the first day of Baishakh. There will be none of the bustle at traditional fairs. Even the vibrant celebrations of other ethnic communities will be absent from the lush landscapes of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and other places. But while the present coronavirus crisis may have brought to a halt our physical presence in all these gatherings, it cannot obliterate the spirit behind these celebrations. Pahela Baishakh's universal appeal unites all the citizens of Bangladesh and beyond, across class, race and religion. It is a recognition of our acceptance of each other, a celebration of our diversity and religious harmony, all part of our heritage.

While we may have to celebrate the New Year quietly in our own homes to adhere to the rules of social distancing, let us not distance ourselves from the spirit of unity, camaraderie and mutual respect. Let us manifest this inclusiveness through our support for each other. The Covid-19 pandemic has evoked the very best human qualities in many of us. We see this dedication to humanity in the number of private initiatives along with the government's, to provide food and financial assistance to the most vulnerable, marginalised people deprived of their livelihoods during the lockdown. We have witnessed how artists have put aside their usual grand preparations of making papier-mâché masks or traditional clay pot painting for the vibrant Mangal Shobhajatra. Instead, artists of Charukola, along with alumni and other individuals, have made personal protective equipment (PPE) to help protect doctors and other medical staff who are the frontline soldiers of the war against Covid-19. This is the true essence of Pahela Baishakh.

Our celebration is therefore of the human spirit that will survive all odds and manifest itself in the most trying of circumstances. As we quietly spend our Pahela Baishakh inside our homes, it is an opportunity for us to appreciate Mother Nature that has eternally sustained us, and make a vow to stop the destruction that we have inflicted at our own peril.

We convey our deepest sympathies to the loved ones of those who have succumbed to the virus and our prayers for those who are fighting it. We wish all our fellow human beings, Shubho Noboborsho. May you stay safe and well.

Walk-in Covid-19 test kiosks

A crucial and safe approach

WITH the support of an NGO—which has been tasked with the collection of samples, while the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) will carry out the tests at their own laboratories—44 walk-in kiosks, based on the South Korean design that has demonstrated impressive success, have been installed across the nation to enable a safe, quick and efficient approach for sample collection in order to conduct Covid-19 tests. We commend this timely initiative to address the lack of testing facilities across the country, given the importance of carrying out mass testing during this pandemic.

The testing booths are designed in such a way that safety of the health workers, as well as of those being tested, is ensured during the sample collection. The setting where the medical technologist stands is kept sterile, and the glass fixture in the middle further ensures that the precautionary distance is maintained while the sample from the supposed patient is being collected from small openings. Moreover, this method eliminates the manpower needed for the job, as well as the requirement to change the personal protective equipment (PPE) kit for every single patient. Following every sample collection, the gloves used and the chair on which the examinees sit are disinfected to ensure safety for the next person in line.

The convener of the NGO stated that an additional 320 booths will be installed in school and college premises across the country in phases. This way, the pressure on the hospitals can be reduced and the general public can easily get tested. As mass testing is the key to ensure safety, the introduction of these booths will serve as a beacon of hope in these dark times. We urge the responsible authorities to take immediate steps to set up such testing kiosks across the nation. We are still struggling in our fight against Covid-19, but such appropriate measures provide a sense of relief.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Domestic dispute during lockdown

Not everyone is actually safe in their own homes. I recently learnt of a distant family member in a difficult situation due to the lockdown. She is married to a man who has a terrible temper, and it has become extremely difficult to spend 24 hours locked indoors with him. Earlier, she would at least be comfortable while he was at work. Instead of assisting her with housework and the children, he has become more arrogant and demanding. The wife is in now constantly under pressure to attend to him, more out of dread than devotion. Those of us who are not in a similar situation are indeed fortunate. The thought of how many more women could be suffering silently from domestic disputes worries me; who is there to help them during these times?

Nipa Sarker, Chattogram



ZOBAIDA NASREEN

Year. Fine Arts students at the University of Dhaka (DU) started creating masks, paintings and replicas for the Mongol Shobhajatra. Shopping malls were about to fill their shelves with colourful clothes and jewellery. Who could imagine then that a deadly global pandemic—novel coronavirus or Covid-19—would take away all the excitement of festivity, and saving lives would become the priority?

Things changed very quickly and beyond our dreams. All of humanity is suffering today as we are in the middle of health and economic emergencies. Not just the festival economy, but most of the economy is now on hold. This year's Baishakh is perhaps the gloomiest one we are having in generations. Why is Pahela Baishakh important in these gravest of times in recent history?

We are almost four weeks into the crisis. Apart from emergency workers, we are mostly confined at home with family members. Living in lockdown or quarantine in tiny rooms can be painful. It is more painful when there is so much uncertainty. No work means many families are struggling to put food on the table. There are growing concerns about the possible health consequences of an extended period of physical distancing, particularly on mental health. Pahela Baishakh as a festival reinforces the idea of the universality of the human condition and injects a sense of togetherness, even in deeply unequal societies. It is also a time to reflect on our past mistakes and misdeeds and plan for the days to come. These are some of the strongest feelings that we need to embrace as we wade through this crisis.

Though differently, people will still celebrate Pahela Baishakh with family and friends. They will not pour onto the streets to celebrate the festival as they usually do. There will be no welcoming of the New Year by Chhayanaut artists at sunrise at Ramna Batamul. There will be no displays of having pantalish. Welcoming the New Year, many indigenous groups living in Bangladesh were also preparing to celebrate their main festivals, but had to drastically curtail their celebrations of Baisu, Sangrai, Biju, Bisu, and Bihu, in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and beyond. Their celebrations are significantly different from Chhayanaut's Borshoboron and DU Fine Arts Faculty's Mongol Shobhajatra.



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to existence—risk of thermo-nuclear war and climate change. The necessity of a steady and capable leader—who grasps the gravity of these challenges—to lead USA, and by extension, the world, cannot be overstated. The Democratic presidential primary race was still now down to Joe Biden (the centrist) versus Bernie Sanders (the progressive), with the winner competing against Republican President Donald Trump in the general elections. The Democratic establishment had left no stone unturned to hand the nomination to Biden and given Sanders' recent withdrawal from the race, they have succeeded. The concern is—on top of Biden's history of being on the wrong side of most major political issues, he continues to show signs of serious cognitive decline. Trump has already brought this up multiple times and will continue to religiously dwell on it till the cows come home. By running such a frail candidate against an incumbent President with a very enthusiastic voter base, the Democrats were essentially willing to risk a Trump victory in order to avoid a Sanders one.

In a decadent US society where unfettered capitalism has become the feature and not the bug, short term profits of large corporations—from fossil fuel companies to defence contractors—supersede the prospect of organised human life. As renowned public intellectual Noam Chomsky points out, "In the US, there is basically one party—the business party. It has two factions,

Yet, it is a day that brings everyone together, celebrating harmony in diversity. Understandably, there will be a lack of vibrant colours, rapturous rhythms, new dishes and excitement as a general mood of fear, depression and uncertainty prevails this year.

Originally a harvest festival marking the beginning of the crop cycle, Pahela Baishakh is also a time to reflect on issues that govern our lives. In these turbulent times, which are often described by world leaders as war-like, our top priority must be to protect the most vulnerable segment of society, who are disproportionately affected by the lockdown. The government has to find ways to minimise hardships by ensuring that people do not die of hunger and lack of treatment. Unfortunately, the early



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signs are ominous: one DU student died without getting treatment, and starving people under lockdown reportedly looted a truck carrying relief goods in Jamalpur. April is very crucial for us. By the end of the month, it should become somewhat clear how deep the crisis is in our country.

When a calamity strikes, it exposes how dangerously unprepared our government is. Despite getting several months for it, the efforts to contain the pandemic lacked coordination, a fact that the health minister himself admitted. Then, unprecedented quarantines have been imposed throughout the country. People are being prevented from travelling, or even going out of their homes. Despite calls for national unity from all sides, we are not all in this together.

The government has announced six

stimulus packages totalling BDT 77,750 crore, which is 2.7 percent of the GDP. All of these are for formal sectors. While these packages are very important for setting the stage for a strong economic recovery, the more immediate need was a survival package for the most vulnerable people under lockdown, who are mostly from informal sectors. The vast majority of those people, living on daily wages and with very low savings, cannot stock up on essentials. Several weeks into the lockdown, community support is also drying up for them. It is imperative that a public distribution system is developed to ensure essentials are delivered to their doors.

What we require urgently is funds and goods for stabilisation during the pandemic, and then to stimulate the

economy after the pandemic. What we witnessed is the announcement of stimulus packages, but not many stabilisation efforts. This is symptomatic of a disproportionate influence of businesses over the government. What will happen after the lockdown? We must start preparing ourselves for post-coronavirus challenges. Diversification of our economy in a reordered global economic order is essential. Labour and health policies need rethinking. We need to invest heavily in universal health care, public education and food security.

Amid these turbulent times, there are signs of hope and courage. Initiatives like Bidyanondo Foundation's alternative food distribution or a leftist group's alternative ambulance services and "Manobotar Bazar" have drawn popular attention.

There are many more community and local initiatives throughout the country.

Everyone's life depends on making sure that they have supplies of essential food items. As we are in the middle of agricultural high season, small farmers and day labourers will be putting themselves in the path of Covid-19 to feed the people. We should not forget that they are especially prone to respiratory illnesses due to their nature of work and ways of living. In this high season, when Covid-19 is spreading in different districts, more measures are needed to change the way these essential workers are forced to live and work.

Some people, especially the lower classes, will possibly experience the greatest hardships of a lifetime. We need the positive powers of Baishakh to help

them get through it. Baishakh prepares us for a new beginning and to dream—not just lofty dreams, but those that are grounded in reality and are achievable. Not only on an individual level either, but a collective dream that puts collective wellbeing at its centre. In spite of Covid-19, dengue or any other public health threat, its spirit means our will to survive and our love of life will triumph.

In this crisis, we are required to face Covid-19 together, even when we are distancing ourselves physically. Pahela Baishakh gives us a chance to experience our community and reminds us of our togetherness, interdependence and solidarity.

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Democratic elite complicit in a potential Donald Trump victory

By backing a barely coherent Joe Biden over Bernie Sanders, Democratic elite have revealed their preference for neo-fascism over mild social democracy

called Democrats and Republicans, which are somewhat different but carry out variations on the same policies."

But in 2016, Bernie Sanders started a political movement without any support from large corporations, wealthy individuals or the media—breaking with a century of American political history. As a Sanders presidency presented a genuine threat to the status quo that the power establishment thrives in, he needed to be stopped at any cost. In all

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likelihood, that has been achieved; at this point, only a cataclysmic event can prevent Biden from being the nominee and even in that scenario, party leaders will not nominate Sanders.

Even with the ceaseless ridicule and rebuke of Sanders, his supporters and his policies by the corporate media, and the party establishment shenanigans in Iowa (the first primary state), the 2020 Democratic primary started off almost like a fairytale for the Sanders camp. With the moderate vote being

split among centrist candidates, Sanders looked to be on the same path to victory as Trump's in the 2016 Republican primary. But after Joe Biden's remarkable South Carolina win, the entire Democratic establishment coalesced around him with astounding velocity and unprecedented coordination on the eve of Super Tuesday, when the greatest number of states held primary elections and caucuses. Biden's fellow moderates in the race—Pete Buttigieg and Amy Klobuchar—immediately dropped out and endorsed him, with Obama reportedly playing a hand behind the scenes. Having initially written Biden off, the national corporate media came around instantly to play their dutiful part and fall in line, providing USD 72 million in largely favourable earned news coverage.

But despite Biden's wondrous turn of fortunes, all major left-wing progressive outlets in USA are warning that he is essentially Hillary Clinton 2.0. Besides the shared affection for pabulum and platitudes, they both voted for—in some cases, championed—disastrous trade deals and (now unpopular) wars. Clinton herself recently stated that "Joe is building the kind of coalition that I had." If that's not a bellwether of impending disaster, I don't know what is. As pointed out by many political commentators, including MSNBC's Chris Hayes and Al Jazeera's Mehdi Hasan—there is no good reason for believing that the Democrats can rerun their 2016 playbook and Donald Trump will not rerun his. Indeed, insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.

In a showdown between Biden and Trump, voters will have to "choose" between two candidates more alike than apart. From policy resumes on hawkish foreign policy to corruption to even sexism and sexual harassment, the differences between the two candidates are far from obvious. And given Trump's formidable advantage in campaign funds

over the Democrats, this would be very easy to exploit and possibly lead to a depressed Democratic voter turnout.

Furthermore, in stark contrast to Biden's current lack of elocution, one of Trump's biggest strengths is (manipulation through) effective communication. Despite his cavernous incompetence on the coronavirus response, Trump is winning the messaging battle. And although the latest ABC/Washington Post poll currently has the two candidates in a virtual tie, the key metric to look at here is the enthusiasm level of supporters, where Trump holds a huge lead over Biden. This is a warning sign for Biden, as all recent Presidential candidates with low supporter enthusiasm ended up on the losing side. Some political commentators are wary of Biden's vapid candidacy and are hence betting on Trump botching the response to the ongoing crisis as the potential path to victory for Biden.

But even if Trump bungles the response to the pandemic and economic downturn, it doesn't automatically guarantee a Biden victory. To win, the Democrats need a large turnout among young voters, independents and typical non-voters (groups Sanders was overwhelmingly winning over); this is especially crucial in the Rust Belt states that delivered Trump's victory in 2016. But despite Biden's recent acknowledgement of the strength of the Sanders movement, he has not yet offered anything concrete to earn the votes of Sanders supporters. And as he has confirmed not picking Sanders as Vice President, party leaders must convince him to pick a major Sanders surrogate (like Nina Turner) or endorse significant policy proposals that matter to progressives. As these are quite improbable, Democratic elites are likely headed towards snatching defeat from the jaws of victory once again.

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