

Celebrate our unity through Pahela Baishakh

Let us shed the darkness of the past to welcome the new year

AFTER two years of observing Pahela Baishakh within the confines of our homes, the festivities are back in our lives this year to invigorate us to start anew, while shedding the negativity of the past. That, in fact, is what the theme of this year's celebrations indicates as well, *"Tumi nirmolô koro, mongolo kore molino mormo muchhaye."* With the threat of Covid largely neutralised through wide-scale vaccination, people are expected to come out in the open to walk on the grass, hear the birds sing and inhale the sweet summer breeze to their lungs' content—all while hopefully maintaining safety protocols. Though the celebrations this year are being tempered down in consideration of Ramadan, we hope the pluralistic spirit of the day endures and carries us through to a better tomorrow.

Pahela Baishakh celebrations transcend all socio-religious barriers or social dikats, and become a unifying force for the people. It is on this day that Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and people of other faiths enjoy traditional songs sitting side by side at Ramna Batamul, a popular meeting ground in Dhaka, or mingling at a town or village fair. The Mongol Shobhajatra, or the parade of good fortune that starts from the Dhaka University campus, is a call for peace, harmony and good tidings. Thus Pahela Baishakh, being the biggest secular festival in Bangladesh, strengthens and reaffirms the cultural bond shared by people regardless of what faith or community they are from. As a symbol of resistance against intolerance and communal mindsets since the 60s, the celebration of Pahela Baishakh has become all the more significant in an environment in which the seeds of hatred threaten to sprout.

It is, of course, unfortunate that the Baishakhki downpour is yet to wash away the soot of fanaticism from the hearts of some fellow citizens, who continue to deny the celebration of Pahela Baishakh as a secular event. We hope all security measures will be taken by the administration to make sure the celebrations are carried out safely and smoothly. Let us all join together to celebrate 1429 and all that we share in common—our culture and our love for our country while remaining respectful of each other and of our differences. That is what the beginning of each Pahela Baishakh has always signified: our ability to come together from our respective backgrounds and celebrate the arrival of the new year with happiness and hope.

We wish our readers and patrons *Shubho Noboborsho!*

Covid treatment must be made affordable to all

Overcharging by private hospitals must stop

IT is most unfortunate that two years into the pandemic, the government has still not been able to ensure proper treatment at affordable costs for Covid-19 patients. A recent study by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has revealed the unbelievably high difference in the treatment cost of Covid between government and private hospitals. According to the study, conducted between August 2021 and March 2022, the treatment cost was more than 12 times higher in private hospitals than that in public healthcare facilities; while the average treatment cost was Tk 35,938 in public hospitals, in private hospitals, the cost was as high as Tk 4,58,537.

The study has also revealed that about 65 percent of Covid patients—in both public and private healthcare facilities—were not provided with the required medicine, while over 33 percent didn't get specialist doctors' advice when required. The study has also highlighted the problems and complications that patients had to face due to delayed service delivery at hospitals.

Unfortunately, this is not the first time that we have come across such revelations. Last year, a similar study was conducted by the Health Economics Unit of the health ministry that found various anomalies in public and private hospitals in providing treatment to Covid patients. The issue of overcharging—for ICU beds, oxygen support, medicines and diagnostic tests—by private hospitals was highlighted in detail in that study. But has anything improved since then? Did the government take any measures to address the issues? Apparently not. The HEU study also mentioned that the private hospitals who were overcharging were actually not following the national Covid-19 treatment protocol. We wonder what even the point of having this protocol is, if the government cannot make all hospitals comply with it.

The TIB study also made a striking revelation about the cost of the government's Covid vaccination programme. It found that the cost of the programme was less than half of what the health minister claimed recently. While according to the minister, the cost was around Tk 40,000 crore, the TIB has found it to be Tk 12,993 to Tk 16,721 crore. Will the health minister clarify the matter?

While it is the government's duty to ensure proper and adequate treatment for Covid patients at affordable costs, it is also their duty to ensure that the vaccination campaigns run smoothly, without any corruption taking place. Since the issue has been raised by the TIB, we think the government now must make the cost breakdown public. There should be no secrecy regarding this. If any evidence of corruption is found, the government must take action accordingly and urgently to restore public confidence in what has been heralded as a widely successful vaccination campaign thus far.

This Pahela Baishakh, let's make a pledge to ruralise our city



OF MAGIC & MADNESS

Badiuzzaman Bay is an assistant editor at The Daily Star.

BADIUZZAMAN BAY

IT'S been quite some time since we've had a Pahela Baishakh in the middle of Ramadan. The convergence of the two occasions, not necessarily a clash of ideologies, begs appreciation of life in its many nuances and complexities. How do you, for example, reconcile the spirit of restraint of the holy month with the unrestrained joy of life and rebirth associated with Bangla New Year? For now, perhaps we should be grateful that we're finally having this moment, regardless of how subdued its celebration. The familiar drum beat or chorus coming out of the historic Ramna Batamul is not only a nod to tradition but also a welcome sight after two years of pandemic-induced closures, during which we lost more than just music. It means turning a page filled with loss and grief, and giving life a fresh start after it has been rudely stopped in its tracks.

Chhayanaut's musical tribute to Pahela Baishakh, or the spectacles of the Unesco-recognised Mongol Shobhajatra, can be equally evocative for those who see in them a celebration of nature and the pastoral life. But here's the irony: How out of place does this celebration seem when done in a concrete mess like Dhaka? Put another way, we're celebrating the rural idyll and values through nature-themed songs, scenes and motifs while surrounded by flyovers, skyscrapers, shopping malls and endless streams of vehicles. In truth, it's more lamentation than celebration. One of the conundrums of our search for a closer connection to the rural world is that the search itself has morphed into a "fancification" of those rustic products and motifs now on display at the festival sites. It's as if the visitors are customers, and what they are really buying into is a sort of processed pastoral.

Dhaka is a city that is not only increasingly encroaching upon the nearby countryside, but also snubbing out all traces of rustic life and values within itself. I say "values" because taking in the scene without taking in what it represents is superficial. Dhaka's urbanisation is in sharp contrast to the ruralisation of some of the foreign cities that we fondly talk about. I remember reading about the ruralisation trend in the UK, where the desire for a closer connection with nature has led to the countryside creeping into many cities and towns—in how their residents shop, eat, play, read, dress, decorate homes, and even spend their time. You can see rustic playgrounds, wildflower meadows nestling beside tower blocks, rustic furniture, weekly farmers' markets, flourishing rural children's literature, street food being sold out of

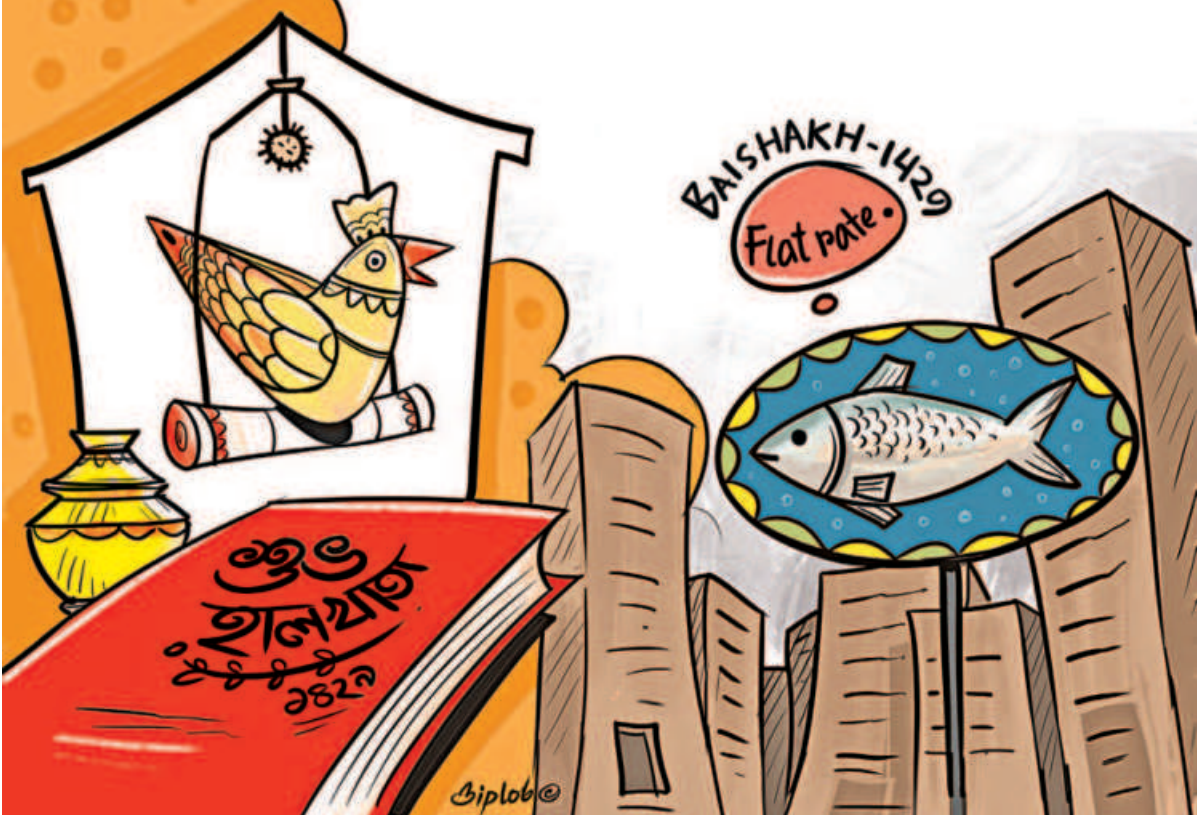


ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

Living in Dhaka as we do, bereft of any real connection with it, what we need is a critical rethink of our desire for pastoral idyll and how we want to achieve it. We must make a conscious effort to turn the clock back on its destructive urbanism.

revamped agricultural trucks, or from village-delivery-style bicycles. The signs of ruralism are everywhere. And there is a deliberate attempt behind it, led by ordinary citizens.

One may argue if this is enough for someone seeking rural contact, or possible in a city like Dhaka. But we are not even giving it a serious thought anymore, let alone a serious

connection and simpleness is the opposite of what living—or dying—means in the countryside.

I got a real taste of that recently after attending the janaza of a relative. He was by no means a popular man—just someone who lived long enough, albeit weakened by infirmity. But his janaza was attended by the whole village. Relatives close and distant, neighbours from

try, apart from having Pahela Baishakh celebrations. As I remarked elsewhere, "Dhaka is trapped in an ironic twist as it grows and falls apart at the same time. Its aggressive development is rivalled only by the progressive decline in almost all other parameters of urban life." Any description of this city these days invariably summons up images of toxic air, loud noise, unsafe drinking water, traffic gridlocks, high population density, high cost of living, inadequate road, transport and recreational facilities, general lack of security, etc.

More than the decline in the quality of sights and scenes, it's the absence of rural values and the essential simpleness associated with them that should bother seekers of rural contact. Imagine walking down a street and being passed by everyone like you don't exist. Imagine not knowing your neighbour. Imagine always looking over your shoulder. Imagine not having meaningful contact with your children or parents. Imagine feeling restless every time you go out, or get on a public transport, anticipating trouble. Imagine feeling lonely even when surrounded by people. Imagine worrying if you'd have a final resting place somewhere you know, or have anyone beyond close relatives at your janaza prayer when you die. This lack of

adjacent villages and even random people who were passing by at the moment felt the need to give him a proper send-off. Memories were shared, tributes offered, and prayers sought. His body, after the janaza, was carried to the gravesite with honour and laid to rest among the people he once knew. As the poet Lang Leav said, "We will remain unwritten through history, no X will mark us on the map; but in books of prose and poetry, you loved me once, in a paragraph." My uncle will remain unwritten in history, but his stories will survive through the people he was connected with.

I have often marvelled at these rural customs, values as well as the power of stories shared and passed through generations. To me, the countryside is more than the purity of water, cleanliness of air, or the unadulterated nature. Living in Dhaka as we do, bereft of any real connection with it, what we need is a critical rethink of our desire for pastoral idyll and how we want to achieve it. We must make a conscious effort to turn the clock back on its destructive urbanism, and begin a gradual process of ruralisation—covering not just the sights and scenes, but also the values that can make us live better. Celebrating Pahela Baishakh is not the answer to the void you feel deep inside.

THE WAR IN UKRAINE

A silent assault on the developing world



Antonio Guterres is the secretary-general of the United Nations.

ANTONIO GUTERRES

FOR the people of Ukraine, the Russian invasion is a waking nightmare—a humanitarian disaster on a terrifying scale. But the war is also fast becoming a matter of life and death for vulnerable people around the world.

We have all seen the tragedy unfolding inside Ukraine: cities flattened; people suffering and dying in their homes and in the streets; the fastest displacement crisis in Europe since World War II. But beyond Ukraine's borders, far beyond the media spotlight, the war has launched a silent assault on the developing world. This crisis could throw up to 1.7 billion people—over one-fifth of humanity—into poverty, destitution and hunger on a scale not seen in decades.

Ukraine and the Russian Federation provide 30 percent of the world's wheat and barley, one-fifth of its maize, and over half of its sunflower oil. Together, their grain feeds the poorest and most vulnerable people, providing more than one-third of the wheat imported by 45 African and least developed countries.

At the same time, Russia is the world's top natural gas exporter, and second largest oil exporter.

But the war is preventing farmers from tending their crops, while closing ports, ending grain exports, disrupting supply chains, and sending prices skyrocketing.

While much of the world has stepped up in solidarity with the people of Ukraine, there is no sign of the same support for the 1.7 billion other potential victims of this war. We have a clear moral duty to support them, everywhere.

Many developing countries are still struggling to recover from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, coupled with historic debt burdens and soaring inflation. Since the start of 2022, wheat and maize prices have increased by 30 percent. Brent oil prices have risen more than 60 percent over the last year, while natural gas and fertiliser prices have more than doubled.

The United Nations' own lifesaving operations are under severe strain. The World Food Programme (WFP) has warned that it faces the impossible choice of taking from the hungry to feed the starving. It urgently needs USD 8 billion to support its operations in Yemen, Chad, and Niger.

Some countries are already sliding from vulnerability to crisis and serious social unrest. And we know that the roots of many conflicts lie in poverty, inequality, underdevelopment and hopelessness.

But while much of the world has stepped up in solidarity with the people of Ukraine, there is no sign of the same support for the 1.7 billion other potential victims of this war. We have a clear moral duty to support them, everywhere.

The Global Crisis Response Group on Food, Energy and Finance that I launched last month aims to develop coordinated solutions to these interlinked crises, with governments, international financial institutions and other key partners. I thank the global leaders in all sectors who are supporting this initiative.

On food, we are urging all countries to keep markets open, resist hoarding and unjustified and unnecessary export restrictions, and make reserves available to countries at the highest risk of hunger and famine. This is not the time for protectionism. There is enough food for

every country to get through this crisis if we act together.

Humanitarian appeals must be fully funded, including for the WFP. We simply cannot allow people to starve in the 21st century.

On energy, the use of strategic stockpiles and additional reserves could help to ease this energy crisis in the short term. But the only medium- and long-term solutions are to accelerate the deployment of renewable energy, which is not impacted by market fluctuations. This will allow the progressive phase-out of coal and all other fossil fuels.

And on finance, the G20 and international financial institutions must go into emergency mode. They must find ways to increase liquidity and fiscal space, so that governments in developing countries can invest in the poorest and most vulnerable, and in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This should be a first step towards deep reforms to our unfair global financial system, which makes the rich richer and the poor poorer.

Social protection, including cash transfers, will be essential to support desperate families through this crisis. But many developing countries with large external debts do not have the liquidity to provide these safety nets. We cannot stand by and watch as they are forced to choose between investing in their people, and servicing their debt.

The only lasting solution to the war in Ukraine and its assault on the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world is peace. As the UN works to support the innocent victims of this war—both inside and outside Ukraine—we call on the global community to speak with one voice and support our plea for peace.

This war must end—now.