

Baishakh comes with good cheer

We must carry new year’s optimism forward and be united for greater good

Yet another Bengali New Year in the middle of Ramadan. This must be acknowledged that it comes at a time of declining morale amid ordinary people’s continued struggle with high food prices, with businesses also witnessing a slump in clothing and sweetmeat sales which were supposed to pick up by now. The celebrations this year are also likely to be tempered down in consideration of the holy month of restraint as well as the sweltering heat outside. Yet, this Pahela Baishakh – the second to be celebrated publicly following two years of pandemic-induced closures – we have ample reason to look forward to the coming days with optimism. We welcome the familiar sights and sounds of festivities at the historic Ramna Batamul, and elsewhere in the country, and hope that the pluralistic spirit that these represent will endure and carry us through to a better future.

Pahela Baishakh is not just an occasion to rejoice. It is much more than that. It is an idea that brings a renewed awareness of what we are, what we used to be, and what we can achieve if we start together. It gives us a chance to renew our commitment to our collective wellbeing. Bangladesh, in the past year, has seen much suffering thanks to the combined fallout of the pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war. It has also seen deep divisions along religious and political lines threatening to rip apart the very fabric of our society. These issues may continue to trouble us for a while more. But as we have seen many times in the past, when faced with apparently insurmountable challenges, we as a nation are capable of doing what’s necessary to overcome them.

Right now, what we need more than anything else is unity, despite all our differences. Pahela Baishakh, which, unlike any Eid or Puja, comes without a religious tag, teaches unity through diversity. Its secular message guides us to find common ground so we can live with some degree of respect for each other and work together for the greater good. On this day, Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and people of other faiths come out in unison celebrating their common ancestral roots. Meanwhile, Mangal Shobhajatra and other festivals serve as a call for peace, harmony and good tidings. All this can strengthen and reaffirm the bond shared by all of us, regardless of what faith or community we come from. As a symbol of resistance against intolerance, bigotry and communal hatred, the celebration of Pahela Baishakh has become all the more significant in our present climate.

So let us all join together to bid farewell to 1429 and welcome 1430, wherever we may be and in whatever manner we feel comfortable. Let us focus on our strengths and utilise them, while trying to minimise our weaknesses and differences. Let us strive together to take our nation to greater heights. This should be our goal going forward.

We wish our readers and patrons Shubho Noboborsho!

A puzzling BRTA diktat

BRTA must work collaboratively with all stakeholders to ensure road safety

We are quite concerned to learn that the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) has asked four road safety organisations – Nirapad Sarak Chai, Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, Road Safety Foundation, and Save The Road – to inform it before releasing data on road crashes and casualties. At a time when the government’s failure to prevent such incidents is being criticised from all sections of the public, particularly road safety campaigners, such an instruction is quite baffling. Reportedly, the BRTA has sent a letter to these organisations saying that their data on road crashes and deaths are creating “confusion” among people as they differ from each other. The organisation asked them to “check the information regarding road accidents on the ground.”

We wonder whether the BRTA has given such instructions with an aim to ensure credible data on road crashes, or if it is just an attempt to discredit or intimidate the road safety campaigners, as we have witnessed in the past.

While it is true that there are some gaps in the data prepared by different road safety organisations – which basically prepare them based on various newspaper reports – the data prepared by the government are not reliable either. For example, recent road crash data prepared separately by the BRTA and Bangladesh Police did not match. While according to the BRTA, 636 people were killed and 752 others injured in 630 road accidents in January and February this year, police data say that a total of 542 people were killed and 420 others injured in 557 road crashes during the same period. Therefore, the accuracy of both sets of data can be questioned. Moreover, these numbers are much lower than those provided by the NGOs working on road safety. Clearly, the need for reliable official data cannot be stressed more.

The government has a plan to implement the National Road Safety Strategic Action Plan 2021-2024 to reduce 20 to 25 percent of casualties by 2024, and to halve the casualty number by 2030. The question is, what or whose number will that be? To achieve this goal, the government will need authentic data. And to ensure this, relevant government agencies need to work in coordination with not just each other but also with those private organisations. Therefore, it will be a mistake on the part of the BRTA to try to deal with them with an aggressive or combative attitude, or to vilify them for the work they do. We also hope that the government organisations, particularly the BRTA, will be open to discussions and suggestions on road safety issues so that they can plan and act properly.

Bangladesh has one of the highest road crash rates in the world. So, the government must stop treating the issue casually or victimising others for its own failure. It must work sincerely to develop a national database on road crash casualties and injuries with assistance from all the stakeholders. Only a positive approach from the government can help ensure safe roads in Bangladesh.

Try and be someone like Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury



Dr Bijon Kumar Sil is an internationally reputed scientist and researcher.

BIJON KUMAR SIL

Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury, a fearless freedom fighter and founder of Gonoshasthaya Kendra, passed away on Tuesday. As I live abroad, the news of his death reached me about an hour late. Words fail me as I am trying to describe the feeling of deep sorrow that washed over me upon hearing the news.

While we get bogged down by a simple bout of fever, it was incredible to see how Zafrullah Sir kept working despite his age and many physical ailments.

I worked with Zafrullah Sir for two years. During the pandemic, he contracted Covid and I observed him closely during that time. We were conducting research at the Gonoshasthaya Kendra laboratory in Savar and were finding success in our research on antigen and antibody testing kits. It was around Eid and most scientists were on leave. I, along with my associate Sagar, was working in the laboratory when Zafrullah Sir called me on my phone and said, “Bijan, I have a fever.”

I apprised him of the symptoms, to which he replied, “Yes, I think I have them.”

I asked him to send over a sample. Owing to the sparse traffic, the sample reached us within 45 minutes from Dhaka. We used our homegrown antigen kit to conduct the test and found him to be Covid positive. I tested the sample four more times, and the result was the same each time.

Confused about my next course of action, I called Monju Bhai (Dr Mohibullah Khandaker Monju). He asked me to keep the matter under wraps and assured me that he would take care of it. I turned my phone off since I knew Zafrullah Sir would call me to know the test results. I didn’t know what to tell him. After returning home from the lab, I eventually dozed off, but woke up soon to see that TV channels were broadcasting the news of Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury being infected with Covid, with my reference.

I called him immediately. From the other end, he asked, “What happened, Bijon? Where is your mobile phone?” I replied, “It ran out of charge.” He questioned, “Is it a drained



Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury

PHOTO: COLLECTED

battery, or is it that you do not want to tell me directly? Do you think I will die of Covid?”

I replied, “I mean, no, not that...”

“Listen, Covid can’t kill me. You should continue your work properly,” replied an unfazed Zafrullah.

To anyone infected with Covid back then, death felt imminent. But it didn’t affect Zafrullah’s willpower. In spite of his multiple health conditions, the manner in which he dismissed his Covid diagnosis rendered me speechless. I requested him to stay safe.

I have met many individuals, both home and abroad, but very few of them possessed the mental prowess of Zafrullah. I witnessed many, younger than him, fearful and demoralised when they were infected with Covid. But Zafrullah was a different kind of survivor.

His courage was evident in all his endeavours. When we announced our intent to make the antigen kits, almost everyone was against us. Even the World Health Organization (WHO) said this kit cannot be used for tests; it won’t be able to detect coronavirus.

Dr Zafrullah asked me, “Bijon, are you 100 percent confident about your kit?”

I told him, “Yes, 100 percent.”

“Then don’t fear anything. Since you know the subject matter, you should continue your work. Never think about the money. Regarding any issues, talk to me directly.”

In Bangladesh’s context, this was a rare course of action. Zafrullah had an innate ability to work and understand the nature of research. If anything was

a lot of people opposed the antigen test, Zafrullah Sir stood by us and continued to show strong resolve.

I first met Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury in 1992 or 1993. Gonoshasthaya Kendra had a vaccine development centre. As I was interested in vaccines, I went there after returning from abroad. After an interview, he and Dr Abul Kashem Chowdhury offered me a job there, but as the government had sent me abroad for PhD, there were some restrictions, and eventually I could not join there.

I met him again in January 2020. Even after all those years, he recognised me instantly, and said, “You have returned, after all this time?”

Gonoshasthaya Kendra is the brainchild of this man. He had many dreams around it, and was able to fulfill most of them.

The role Gonoshasthaya Kendra played in the Cox’s Bazar Rohingya camps is remarkable. Almost 1,200 staff members worked there, but most of us don’t know about these efforts.

He tried to stay connected with each and every noble effort. After hearing about the fire at Bangabazar, he went there too. He dedicated his life towards the betterment of people in this country. I don’t think the country will ever be blessed with another individual like him.

Many people say many things about him. But I would like to urge them to first try and be like Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury; try to replicate his epic efforts. If possible, like Zafrullah, dedicate your own life to the betterment of people.

Death is inevitable. His departure is part of life’s natural course. But we have to hold steadfast to his ethics. This duty falls upon each and every member of Gonoshasthaya Kendra. If we want a joyful afterlife for him, we must take his brainchild forward, and that progression has to follow the path shown by none other than Zafrullah Sir himself. Gonoshasthaya Kendra and all its various institutes should be led under able leadership.

My request to the government and each and every individual of Bangladesh is to help Gonoshasthaya Kendra continue its journey of serving humanity.

(During the pandemic, Dr Bijon Kumar Sil worked at Gono University researching antigen and antibody test kits under the tutelage of Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury. The kit was successfully developed, but due to several complexities, it could not be marketed.)

Translated from Bangla by Mohammed Ishtiaque Khan.

Besides forex reserves, nature needs replenishing too



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KAZI AMDADUL HOQUE

The recent foreign exchange reserve crisis in Bangladesh has the best of experts worried. Besides maintaining the financial stability of the country, forex reserves also ensure that the country has enough moolah to import food in case of a sudden crisis – including climate-related ones, to which Bangladesh is quite prone – and buy emergency medical supplies or arrange for fuel, as seen in recent times. But what does a country do to fight an unpredictable climate crisis? What other ways does it have to become a more adaptive nation?

As the current climate situation threatens the existing financial protocols and the ways in which the economy works, the world is finding new ways to address these issues. To some environmental experts, the answer is simple. The Covid pandemic has delivered a harsh lesson across the world. Nature wants to be treated right and climate change impacts will become even harsher if positive changes are not incorporated in

the current practices. This includes replenishing more than just monetary reserves; it means replenishing natural water and forest reserves, restoring forests and wetlands, and reversing air pollution. Savings need not, or rather, should not, solely be financial.

Think of it as something akin to the happiness indicator. A number of unconventional criteria help measure how happy a nation and its citizens are. For a disaster-prone country like Bangladesh, a security indicator might work, where the ecological reserves (such as land, forests, water bodies, and biodiversity) and how well they have been preserved can be used to measure how independent and secure a nation is in the advent of a climate-change-induced natural calamity.

Historically, when people did not have the financial ability to buy food, they would often dig up potatoes from their yard or fish from their ponds to manage the day’s nutrition. They also had the option to sell these wares, or

even part of their livestock, simply to survive the difficult days. If this culture can be revived, fewer people would face economic hardships and would have another, easier means of survival. This solution does not need to remain restricted to individual homes; entire communities could work together to ensure their own nutrition through similar processes.

Urban citizens, too, can do much to preserve natural resources. Those who can avail the space on their rooftops to build gardens should take up the responsibility of doing so. This not only ensures their food security to an extent, but also ensures organic nutrition. Similarly, urban homes have solar panels that have been made mandatory by the government. Unfortunately, the use of such solar panels is yet to become widespread. Using these panels can help people become energy-efficient, promote renewable energy, and help the environment in the process.

Millions of litres of water are wasted every day in Bangladesh. If every farmer, be it rural or urban, becomes a little more conscious about wasting water, it is possible to revert the wastage and save water for irrigation purposes.

Recycling glass, plastic, paper, and fabric can save additional dollars, and promoting the production and use of such products can help the country in the long run in the face of fewer

clogged landfills and harmful gas releases. Using products that can be reused over time, such as steel straws instead of plastic straws, jute or cloth bags instead of polythene bags, can make a big difference.

In countries like Bangladesh, where adaptation requirements are foremost on people’s minds, much has been done to help the common people until meaningful mitigation takes place. Some of these adaptation measures have, over time, turned into maladaptation practices, such as shrimp cultivation. Natural salinity of agricultural land saw shrimp cultivation as a way to adapt, whereby farmers could use *gher* (fish farm) culture to grow certain crops as well as cultivate shrimp in saline soils. However, it soon became evident that the shrimp export sector was a good way to make money in export markets, and thus, malpractices such as manually increasing salinisation in certain soils increased. While this made land conducive to cultivating shrimp, it also made it less fertile to grow any other crops on.

As millions of dollars have already been invested into such practices, new programmes must be incorporated for green transition. And funds must be allocated in national budgets to facilitate this transition as well as to pay for the investors’ interests and encourage them for more green investments.