

CHAITRA SANKRANTI

# How do we detox our social body?



BLWOIN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

If you are here to read about Chaitra Sankranti, now is your time to turn back. But if you are here to read about having closure to the old Bangla year, that needed to have a ritualistic and symbolic detoxing through the consumption of a range of green and bitter foods, then you can stay on.

Cultural insiders indulge in repeated practices to assert their allegiance to a community and endorse a worldview. As one Bangla year comes to an end, most of us will celebrate the incoming year as an occasion to welcome the new and commit to the existing structure of things to reinforce the tradition that is linked to our essential identity, rooted in the soil and the soul that we define as Bangalee. For some, the day holds religious significance as the green, bitter, and leafy items are consumed with symbolic purpose.

other bitter dishes. Did the outgoing year leave a bitter taste in your mouth? Do we need to spring into the new year with a lot of rejuvenated greenery? Isn't green a symbol of youth and vitality? Why, then, are we dealing with a generation that has been incorrigibly bitter? How do we detox our social body? Just a day-long observance of a ritual will not bring any social change. For change to occur, the passion and belief systems to which our youth have been conditioned need to be reassessed.

You may wonder why I am choosing a particular age group when considering change. The long and short of it is that we are passing through a once-in-a-lifetime demographic dividend. But we are failing to reap its benefits as we have not managed to provide the right education or orientation to our

enjoying the double bill of Eid and the Bangla New Year. I am trying to process the news of the death of a dentist father who got attacked by a gang of youth in Chattogram while trying to protect his son from their beatings. The son went out to buy iftar for his family when he came across the gang mercilessly manhandling two schoolboys. Responding to the

son Ali Reza's harrowing ordeal sheds light on the ruthlessness of teen gangs and the fear they instil in communities. His cry for justice resonates with countless families across the nation who have fallen victim to similar acts of senseless violence. The loss of Korban Ali is more than just a personal tragedy; it is a collective loss for our society,

patronisation cultivates a toxic environment that fosters lawlessness and obscures accountability.

The psycho-social aspects of gang culture play a significant role in perpetuating this cycle of violence. For many young people, especially those from marginalised communities, joining a gang offers a sense of belonging and identity in

as figures who are indifferent to the plight of ordinary people and as the root cause of criminal activities, it is not abnormal for the public to disengage from the political process altogether. Ironically, one's conscious stance against politics can be political in itself. For instance, students who resist campus politics at Buet, whether they like it or not, have already become part of the political system. Activities aimed at improving someone's status or increasing power within an organisation are common features of campus politics. The way the protesting students have located their personal experiences of keeping violence off their academic course has made them navigate a system of power relationships. They are staying away from exams to stop the student wings of political parties from formally operating on campus. Their bitter memories made them exhibit the different shades of green that we, the grey-haired generations, often fail to realise.

The vice-chancellor of Buet has said that politics allows students to open their eyes. But on the other side of the globe, the sun has come out of the moon's shadow. Their eyes are already open. These students have promised their VC: give us a politics-free campus, and we will give you a ranked university.

It is time for us to decide which type of students we should invest in. Who are the ones who will give us dividends? Chaitra Sankranti is also a day to repay all debts. A father's murder is a national debt that we must repay by investing in our next generation. When we remove the curtain of darkness, the sun also rises. It's time to cleanse the social body of the ills afflicting it. Gang culture, partisan politics, and hapless youth cannot be part of the algorithm needed for a Smart Bangladesh.



VISUAL: SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM

**What is particularly alarming is the reported affiliation of these gangs with influential political figures, as highlighted by Ali Reza's accusation that the gang members were supporters of a local Awami Jubo League leader. Such connections only embolden these groups, granting them impunity to terrorise neighbourhoods and prey upon innocent individuals.**

One of our colleagues shared a dish of green jackfruits with us on Eid. She said that they would have it on Chaitra Sankranti as part of many

young generation.

Now, you may say it is a rather pessimistic thought to have when the nation is in such a festive mood,

pleas of the victims, he called the emergency hotline of the police. Irked by his action, the gang turned on him and started beating him. His father came to his rescue, but a brick block struck him instead. He succumbed to his injuries on the eve of Eid.

The dentist father Korban Ali's courageous act to shield his son from harm exemplifies the lengths to which parents go to safeguard their children, but it also underscores the pervasive threat posed by these gangs and the devastating consequences they can inflict upon families. His

one which reflects the failure of our system to protect its citizens from such preventable tragedies.

What is particularly alarming is the reported affiliation of these gangs with influential political figures, as highlighted by Ali Reza's accusation that the gang members were supporters of a local Awami Jubo League leader. Such connections only embolden these groups, granting them impunity to terrorise neighbourhoods and prey upon innocent individuals. Intertwining

gang culture with political environments where opportunities for positive social mobility are limited. The allure of power, respect, and protection within the gang hierarchy can be seductive, drawing vulnerable individuals into a life of crime and violence. The abuse of narcotic substances adds to the menace.

These instances reaffirm the status of politics as corrupt and self-serving, contributing to a sense of apathy and disillusionment. When citizens perceive political leaders

as figures who are indifferent to the plight of ordinary people and as the root cause of criminal activities, it is not abnormal for the public to disengage from the political process altogether. Ironically, one's conscious stance against politics can be political in itself. For instance, students who resist campus politics at Buet, whether they like it or not, have already become part of the political system. Activities aimed at improving someone's status or increasing power within an organisation are common features of campus politics. The way the protesting students have located their personal experiences of keeping violence off their academic course has made them navigate a system of power relationships. They are staying away from exams to stop the student wings of political parties from formally operating on campus. Their bitter memories made them exhibit the different shades of green that we, the grey-haired generations, often fail to realise.

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## Arrest of journalist over RTI request is ominous

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SHAMSUL BARI and RUBI NAZ

The arrest and imprisonment of a journalist last month in Sherpur District over his request under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2009 has rattled concerned citizens. According to media reports, on March 5, Shafiuzzaman Rana, a correspondent for Bangla daily *Desh Rupantor* went to the office of the Nokla UNO (Upazila Nirbahi Officer) to submit an RTI application about the purchase of computers and laptops under a government project. Rana asked for a receipt of the application, but the office assistant asked him to wait till the arrival of the UNO, who was at a meeting. This apparently led to heated discussions between the two, upon which Rana called the deputy commissioner of the district directly to complain.

Hearing the commotion, the UNO returned to her office and a more serious altercation broke out between the two sides. Nokla police were called in and Rana was quickly arrested for misbehaviour with public officials. With equal alacrity, a mobile court conducted by the assistant commissioner (and) sentenced Rana to six months' imprisonment and ordered the seizure of his two mobile phones. He was charged with "trespassing into a government office, causing commotion, obstructing government work, creating a disorderly situation, and misconduct." Rana was also "found guilty under Section 188 of the 1860 Penal Code and for molesting a female employee under Section 509 of the Penal Code." Held in Sherpur District Jail for one week, Rana was released on bail on March 12. A local magistrate's court scheduled a hearing on Rana's appeal against the verdict on April 16.

This incident comes at a time when the country had just begun to reap, however timidly, the benefits of the law which seeks to engage citizens to assist the government in making governance more transparent and accountable. All three main actors in the RTI Act have been more active recently. Citizens have begun to use the law more responsibly to seek relevant information from public offices. The latter are also increasingly responsive. And finally, the Information Commission, tasked with resolving disputes between the two sides, appears to be more even-handed in its approach to RTI matters. All these are conducive to the success of this, perhaps, most groundbreaking law of the land.

The disturbing events surrounding Rana's arrest are therefore deeply troubling. As the news spread, journalist groups, both at home and abroad, raised concern. To the credit of the Information Commission (IC), it released a press statement announcing that it found it fit to probe the issue under Section 25(4) of the Right to Information Act, 2009. Information Commissioner Shahidul Alam Jhinuk was assigned to conduct the investigation.

On his part, the new and energetic State Minister for Information Mohammad Ali Arafat was also quick to respond. He called the Chief Information

Commissioner (CIC) and urged for immediate action. The investigation by the IC was completed on March 17, and the next day the CIC went to see the minister to apprise him of the findings and his decision to summon both the parties to the IC for a hearing. At the hearing on April 2, the Nokla UNO was found guilty for failure to act in accordance with the law and the IC recommended punitive departmental action against her.

We commend the authorities for such quick actions. However, as the case runs its course, there are larger issues about the implementation of the RTI Act that should raise concern for the nation as a whole.

Clearly, the eruption of hostility surrounding the submission of a simple RTI request to a public official was uncalled for. The law foresees the submission

who are in fact helping the country emerge from the darker days of official secrecy and enter into the sunshine of open and accountable governance.

That such openness is not a pipe dream has already been proven in many areas of governance. For instance, the use of RTI by citizens has brought more transparency in the allocation and distribution of many government safety net programmes, ensured proper delivery of free medicine at government clinics, brought more transparency to the disbursement of scholarship money for students, etc.

It is time, therefore, that public authorities recognise the enormous potential of the RTI Act in contributing to a mutually beneficial citizen-government relationship that can promote better governance. The initial fear of many public officials



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

of RTI requests to the designated officer (DO) of an authority by hand or post. It is the job of the DO to provide a receipt without any questions asked. The law specifically underlines that no questions may be asked about why citizens seek any legitimate information. It is their right.

Unfortunately, the latter point is still often lost on many public officials. Incidents like the one in Sherpur reportedly take place regularly all over the country. In fact, as the Sherpur story unfolded, there were newspaper reports about five journalists being threatened with arrest and subjected to verbal abuse in Lalmonirhat when they appeared at a hearing relating to land mutations to obtain reportable information (though not directly related to any RTI requests). National and international journalists' associations expressed concern, and the information minister had to assure them of appropriate action.

We regularly receive reports from RTI fans in the country regarding the high-handed behaviour of many public officials, which are often mentioned in these columns. Such behaviour undermines the positive image of many other government officials

that the law would be used by citizens primarily to harass them has largely been proven wrong. More RTI requests are being made on matters of public interest than to malign or embarrass public officials.

We underline the importance of both the Information Commission and other government bodies in recognising that the RTI Act is unique among all the laws of the land, in that it was specifically adopted to empower citizens to both assist and monitor the work of the government. It is a law that only citizens can use and set in motion. Their interest must, therefore, receive the highest priority from all concerned.

It was encouraging to see the CIC visiting the office of the Information Minister, head of the nodal ministry overlooking the implementation of the RTI Act, to brief him about the Sherpur incident and reassure him of appropriate action. A similar gesture to reassure citizens, the main protagonist of this law, was equally called for. Regular meetings between the IC and citizens' groups to discuss the pros and cons of the law's implementation can go a long way to advance its objectives.

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

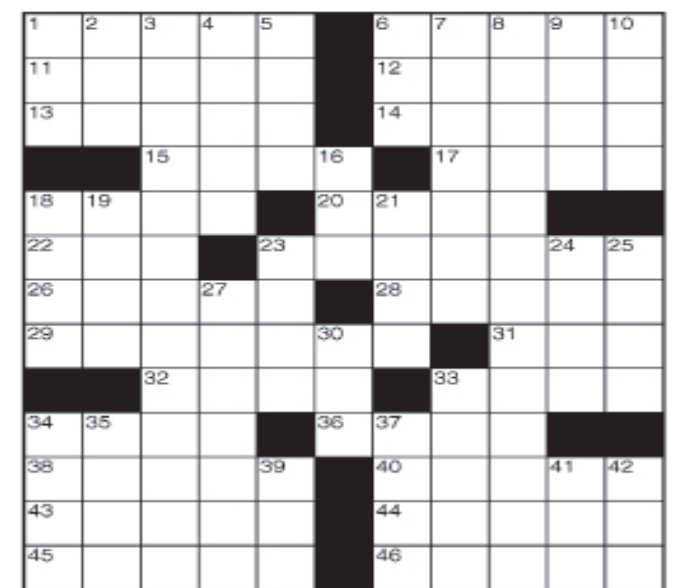
- 1 Pluto's realm
- 6 Stands
- 11 Snowy wader
- 12 Bakery come-on
- 13 "the Top"
- 14 Pull out all the stops
- 15 Wee bites
- 17 Brooklyn team
- 18 Quick jab
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- 22 Mathematician Lovelace
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DOWN

- 33 Trojan War hero
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10 Hangs low

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- 18 Accord
- 19 Freshner target
- 21 Poet Khayyam
- 23 Table d'--
- 24 Musical Home
- 25 River of
- 1-Across reading
- 27 Odometer
- 30 Praiseful poem
- 33 Cheering loudly
- 34 San Juan Hill setting
- 35 Without repairs
- 37 Staff symbol
- 39 Headed
- 41 Acquire
- 42 Hosp. sections



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