

A potent display of unity amid diversity

This year's Pahela Baishakh celebrations held special meaning

Music, fairs, and colourful processions—the celebrations welcoming the Bangla New Year 1432 were truly a sight to behold. On Monday, people came out in droves to participate in what is typically the largest festival observed in the country, particularly in Dhaka. This year's festivities carried special significance, being the first after the fall of a dictatorship that had pushed the people to the edge for more than a decade.

Misgivings abounded ahead of the celebrations, though, especially after two motifs created for the Borsho Boron Anondo Shobhajatra were burnt down on the Dhaka University campus just two days prior. There was also controversy surrounding the renaming of the traditional morning procession in the capital. Fortunately, the unease that had been thus stirred did not overshadow or mar the festivities eventually. In the end, a greater sense of unity and togetherness prevailed.

What truly set this Pahela Baishakh festival apart was the scale of public participation: members of around 28 different ethnic minority communities, along with people from all walks of life, joined in the processions and festivities. From eight-year-olds to octogenarians, everyone came out to proudly stake their claim to a shared heritage and cultural identity. The message of peace, inclusivity, and diversity was loud and clear. This, we must acknowledge, was made possible by the government's commendable efforts in ensuring that the celebrations proceeded smoothly and safely.

That is not to say the festivities were entirely without blemish. The suspension of celebrations at Chattogram's DC Hill, for example, was quite distressing. It followed an attack by a group of miscreants, identified as members of the BNP-backed Jatiyatabadi Samajik Sangskritik Sangstha (Jasas) and its like-minded organisations, who opposed the programme and vandalised the venue. This is an issue that BNP should address with due seriousness.

Apart from that, beyond the music and joy, festivals like this should also prompt reflection. Ours is a heritage built on resilience, communal harmony, and compassion, but we must also confront the uncomfortable truth that intolerance, exclusion, and discrimination have increasingly taken root in our society. Monday's celebrations marked a step towards resisting those influences and reaffirming our collective desire for a truly equal and inclusive society. Moving forward, we must strive to be free from prejudice and inequality in all spheres of life. Our social, political, and economic systems must become truly inclusive and diverse, and the discrimination still faced by marginalised communities must be eradicated. Only then can we build a society that truly reflects the spirit of Pahela Baishakh.

Brick kilns destroying Ctg farmlands

Why aren't the authorities taking strict measures?

It is alarming to learn of farmers in Chattogram's Fatikchhari and Hathazari upazilas who are facing losses due to crop damage caused by toxic smoke from nearby brick kilns. Reportedly, crops are being covered in dust from the smoke, and as a result, many farmers are failing to even recover their production costs. For some, crop yields have declined by more than half since the kilns began operating near their croplands. Some are reportedly even considering abandoning their profession.

Crops grown near brick kilns do not develop as expected and must be washed before being sold. Toxic fumes from the kilns also raise significant food safety concerns. Currently, according to data from the Department of Environment (DoE), over 90 brick kilns are operating across the two upazilas. Under the Brick Production and Kiln Installation (Regulation) Act, establishing brick kilns on or within a one-kilometre radius of agricultural land is prohibited. Many kilns in these areas, however, have been set up in direct violation of the law. Moreover, most of the kilns use firewood as fuel—another breach of existing regulations that contributes significantly to harmful emissions, exacerbating the damage to nearby croplands.

This trend—which many other regions also suffer from—remains a norm despite recent efforts by the interim government. For example, according to a previous report citing officials from the DoE and the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) in Rangpur, some 984 brick kilns are operating on farmlands in eight districts of the division. The persistence of this problem shows how difficult it is to address it without proper support from political parties, considering the involvement of local politicians and political muscles in the operation of brick kilns.

While the government needs to address these broader problems associated with brick kilns, it is important to take their damaging effect on farmlands more seriously. The costs inflicted on farmers may drive them out of business entirely, affecting our food security. And the damage being done to the productivity of farmlands could take significant time and resources to reverse. As such, we urge the government to take stock of brick kilns operating close to farmlands across various regions—including Chattogram—and shut or relocate them before they cause any further harm.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Harriet Quimby's flight across the English Channel

On this day in 1912, American aviator Harriet Quimby became the first woman to fly across the English Channel, guiding her French Blériot monoplane through heavy overcast from Dover, England, to Hardelot, France.

EDITORIAL

How to mitigate the impact of Trump's reciprocal tariffs



MACRO MIRROR

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Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

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The United States government's decision on reciprocal tariffs has sent shockwaves through financial markets and reverberated through economies worldwide. On April 2, the US introduced a sweeping tariff policy, imposing a baseline 10 percent reciprocal tariff on all imports and even higher country-specific tariffs. Bangladesh faced a crippling 37 percent tariff on its exports to the US. This new tariff regime not only sparked a global market crash but also ignited diplomatic and economic turmoil. Of course, a 90-day pause in the tariff decisions was placed within a week.

The market reaction was just one factor among several influencing the temporary change of decision on the tariffs. Growing political concern, both within the US and among international trading partners, has also been an issue. Many industry leaders and governments voiced unease over the economic uncertainty caused by these new tariffs. Concurrently, diplomatic negotiations took place, especially with countries that had avoided retaliatory measures. These combined factors led to the temporary suspension of tariffs on April 9 for more than 75 countries, while maintaining—and in some cases strengthening—the measures specifically directed towards China.

The US decision to impose a 145 percent tariff was met with a retaliatory 125 percent tariff from China on American goods. This tit-for-tat dynamic suggests that what was once a strategic economic rivalry has now spiralled into a trade war with far-reaching global consequences, where collateral damage is inevitable. For smaller export-dependent economies like Bangladesh, which are plugged into global supply chains through their economic activities, the repercussions

are significant.

Bangladesh's trade in goods with the US is about \$10.6 billion. In 2024, our total goods exports to the US were \$8.4 billion, and imports from the US amounted to \$2.2 billion. The additional 37 percent reciprocal tariff, if put into effect, presents a threat to Bangladesh's exports, especially its RMG sector, which is its economic lifeblood. RMG exports account for more than 85 percent of the country's exports to the US. Though a Least Developed Country (LDC), Bangladesh has not been allowed duty-free, quota-free (DFQF) market access for its RMG

economy but also an important source of employment. Therefore, the consequences of these tariffs for the RMG industry cannot be ignored. A reduction in orders from US retailers due to higher prices could force factories to cut back on production. In a labour-intensive industry, this will lead to job losses. Such a reduction could also have social ramifications—from rising unemployment and poverty to increased pressure on public services and social safety nets.

Beyond the direct impact on exporters and workers, high tariffs also threaten to disrupt Bangladesh's macroeconomic stability. Lower export earnings could lead to a widening trade deficit and reduced foreign exchange reserves. Additionally, the anticipated decline in US demand could push Bangladeshi manufacturers to slash profit margins and invest less in innovation, skills, and sustainability measures.

Following the US tariff announcement, the Bangladesh



RMG exports, the engine of Bangladesh's external economy, account for more than 85 percent of its exports to the US.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

to the US since 2013. The country has already been paying a 15 percent tariff for its RMG products to enter the US market.

The new tariff regime will make Bangladeshi goods significantly more expensive in the US. As a result, US buyers may opt for suppliers from countries not subjected to the same tariff burdens—and Bangladesh risks losing market share in one of its most critical export destinations. The price shock could be absorbed by US buyers and Bangladeshi exporters to shield consumers from high prices. But whether, and by how much, the increased cost will be shared by exporters and importers is uncertain.

The RMG sector is not only the engine of Bangladesh's external

government wrote a letter to the US president on April 7 requesting the US to postpone the implementation of the tariffs for three months. Bangladesh has signalled a willingness to import more US products, including agricultural commodities like cotton, wheat, and soybeans, in an attempt to reduce the existing trade deficit.

One of the unfinished tasks has been developing a robust export sector in Bangladesh through diversification of both export products and markets. Dependency on a single export product is a weak trade strategy, as it is subject to vulnerability from both domestic and external shocks. Product diversification also includes the expansion of items within the RMG industry. Beyond RMG, leather

products and pharmaceuticals also have a higher export potential. Diversification of markets will also help buffer against trade shocks to some extent. Moreover, Bangladesh must continue to invest in enhancing the quality and value of its products through improved designs, sustainability certifications, and compliance with international labour and environmental standards to maintain its competitive edge.

Since powerful countries have consistently undermined the rule-based multilateral trading system over the years, the objective of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to promote open and fair trade globally by reducing or eliminating tariffs has been facing challenges. Therefore, WTO member states have resorted to plurilateral and bilateral trade agreements. Bangladesh is lagging behind in this regard. We should negotiate free trade agreements (FTAs) with our trading partners to prepare a robust trade sector. Countries such as Vietnam and Cambodia, which also export RMG products, have moved far ahead in this regard, enhancing their market access and export competitiveness.

Bangladesh should aggressively pursue FTAs that will offer tariff-free or reduced-tariff access to other markets. Strengthening its presence in regional trade blocs like BIMSTEC and deepening engagement with ASEAN economies could open new pathways for trade growth and regional integration. To achieve these objectives, the government must also align domestic policies with international standards, particularly concerning labour rights and environmental regulations. A thorough review of its tariff structures is also important. This is especially so as the country will graduate from LDC status in November 2026—when it will no longer enjoy non-reciprocity of tariff measures with its trading partners.

As part of trade policy reform, Bangladesh should demonstrate its commitment to fair trade by reducing non-tariff barriers (NTBs) and improving customs facilitation. Capacity-building across industries—via training programmes, technology adoption, and quality assurance mechanisms—will be essential to elevate the country's exports beyond price sensitivity.

The 90-day window is, therefore, an opportunity for Bangladesh to prove its diplomatic agility, economic foresight, and institutional capacity to respond to external shocks. Of course, it will take a long time to implement trade reforms. But if worked on systematically, Bangladesh can turn this challenge into a catalyst for transformation. It can leverage this critical moment for sustainable growth that is less dependent on preferential access and more rooted in innovation, diversification, quality, and productivity.

Lessons from neighbours on RTI use

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Since the interim government took office following the July-August uprising in 2024, this column has mainly aimed to draw the attention of our youth to the enormous potential of the Right to Information Act (RTI), 2009 as an instrument to realise their dream of just and equitable governance. However, with the departure of the three information commissioners, the Information Commission of Bangladesh (ICB) virtually became a defunct body. While we await the revival of the commission, we can learn how our neighbours in the region benefit from the law.

A perennial concern of RTI users worldwide is the definition of "public authority." Public institutions like to avoid being included in this definition so they can refuse to respond to RTI requests. Even the Indian Supreme Court once argued that it fell outside the Indian Right to Information Act, 2005, but had to change its stance due to relentless RTI activism. Our Supreme Court, too, appears to consider itself to be outside the scope of the law as it has not named a designated officer as mandated by our RTI Act 16 years after its adoption.

Last month, the Court of Appeal of Sri Lanka ruled that the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Sri Lanka

(ICASL) fell within the country's Right to Information Act, 2016. This meant that professional bodies performing public functions must respect citizens' right to access information.

The case arose when an RTI applicant sought information from ICASL about an alleged fraud and misappropriation of Rs 20.7 million. ICASL refused, arguing it was not a "public authority" under the law. The applicant complained to Sri Lanka's RTI commission, which ruled that ICASL must disclose the information requested. ICASL challenged the ruling in the Court of Appeal, which upheld the commission's position. The court opined that ICASL, a statutory body with self-regulatory functions, performs duties that directly impact public interest. The statute of the body granted it authority over the accounting profession, making it accountable under the RTI framework. The judgment emphasised that any institution performing a public function must comply with Sri Lanka's RTI law, even if independently managed. This is likely to have far-reaching consequences for professional bodies and regulatory institutions in Sri Lanka. The same should apply in Bangladesh if our citizens take an interest in probing the law.

Our next story highlights the demand for complete transparency in government decisions regarding internet shutdowns, surveillance, and censorship, an issue that gained prominence during the July-August uprising. It also emphasises the importance of developing legal

strategies that use court rulings to further the objectives of the RTI Act.

Internet shutdowns in India—though legally permissible—must adhere to the procedures and safeguards outlined in law and the guidelines established by the Supreme Court. For instance, under the Temporary Suspension of Telecommunication Services Rules, a review committee must be constituted if an authority imposes an internet shutdown. If this committee believes that the suspension order does not comply with the provisions of the law, it can order it to be set aside. However, the findings of review committees across the country are not publicly shared.

In this context, in May 2024, the Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF), a local civil society body, submitted an RTI request to the Home Department of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, which reportedly holds the world record for the most frequent internet shutdowns. It sought information about the review committee's findings regarding internet shutdowns in the state. The response was that the information was available on the department's website. Not satisfied, IFF filed an appeal with the First Appellate Authority, which ordered disclosure of the information on suspensions since February 2024. Since IFF intends to seek disclosure of all review committee orders on internet shutdowns in the state since 2020, it decided to appeal to the State Information Commission—the Second Appellate Authority.

Media reports indicate that IFF's appeal to the Second Appellate Authority is based on Indian Supreme Court order dated February 23, 2024, in a case filed by the Foundation for Media Professionals, another civil society body, against the Government of Jammu and Kashmir. In that order, the court held that the union and state governments must publish the state's review committee orders overseeing internet shutdowns. In compliance, the central government announced in the same month that it would publish the review committee's orders assessing internet shutdowns in Jammu and Kashmir as public information without providing the reasons for such shutdowns.

The First Appellate Authority of the state had interpreted the above to apply to internet suspensions following the central government's February 2024 announcement. The IFF appeal challenges the assumption that the Supreme Court had set a temporal limit in its ruling.

Whatever the outcome, the dogged determination of the Jammu and Kashmir civil society to pursue the matter relentlessly is admirable. Without such determination, the RTI Act cannot effectively advance public interest in a democracy. We need such determination among our citizens. We hope that the renewed energy of our youth, displayed during and after last year's uprising, will be harnessed to unlock the immense potential of the RTI Act, not least to tackle arbitrary internet suspensions.