



PAHELA BAISHAKH ALPONA

When Dhaka turns into a canvas

RBR

Now that the hullabaloo of Pahela Baishakh is over, the festival colours have yet to fade. The sprawling asphalt streets of Dhaka became a canvas for residents, when the age-old Baishakh alpona painting took place. This Pahela Baishakh 2026, decorative street painting took centre stage and, for once, stole a bigger spotlight than the parade.

I say this because in Uttara Sector 5, the green lane beside the lake -- a sanctuary for birds and a favourite walkway for morning strollers -- was painted with a decorative stretch of white alpona. It was a first in my 23 years



of living in this suburban township. Folk floor art, or alpona, is a decorative tradition created on the ground using rice paste, chalk, coloured powders, and paint, mostly during cultural festivals. My first encounter with alpona was at my uncle's wedding



in the late seventies. It had to be painted at night because the red stone staircase and courtyard were always busy during the day.

To cut the story short, my association with alpona drawing is inseparable from cousins, music, food, fun, and laughter in the dead of night. To relive that joy, I always make it a point to attend street alpona events.

In modern urban celebrations like Pahela Baishakh, alpona has expanded from courtyards and homes to entire streets, where artists and community members paint intricate designs overnight, turning roads into vast canvases. Dhaka's streets come alive with this traditional Bengal art form -- a temporary, ornamental painting that transforms public spaces through colour, motifs, and symbolism.

Manik Miah Avenue, the sidewalk beside the Fine Art Institute at Dhaka University, and more recently Gulshan, Banani Road II, and Uttara have all joined the list. Here, alpona is considered both art and ritual, embodying joy, unity, and tradition

while creating a festive atmosphere that draws crowds together and turns the city into a living canvas of heritage.

Nowhere was this more vivid than Banani Road II, where the cultural celebration Rong Dhonger Utshob 1433 unfolded overnight. Organised by Together for Bangladesh and the Banani Society, the event transformed the road into a sprawling mural of intricate alpona patterns, painted by artists, volunteers, and residents who gathered under the night sky. The atmosphere was electric -- filled with laughter, music, and the aroma of traditional food stalls -- creating a communal spirit that carried into the dawn, as Faisal Ahmed Bhubon, a system engineer at Amber IT, described.

The word "alpona" in Bangladesh carries a broader cultural meaning -- it is tied to community celebration, artistic expression, and national identity. During the Bengali New Year, streets in Dhaka are transformed into vast alpona canvases, where geometric motifs, lotus flowers, fish, birds, and folk symbols are painted to welcome

prosperity and joy.

My cousin brought along her expatriate colleague, newly posted in Dhaka, and her first Pahela Baishakh experience was jaw-droppingly awesome. Yet, we struggled to explain the finer nuances and full cultural depth of an alpona painting event in English.

Alpona is best left untranslated in cultural contexts, because it embodies a uniquely Bengali tradition that goes beyond mere decoration -- it is a living art form of community and festivity.

At Rong Dhonger Utshob 1433 in Banani II, creativity and spontaneous public participation made alpona painting the centrepiece. And just as the sun rose to a new dawn, the Bangladesh Street Kids Aid Group performed skateboarding across the alpona-covered street, blending youthful energy with cultural artistry.

The presence of the DNCC administrator and the presidents of Banani Society, Gulshan Society, and other dignitaries in these mass celebrations reinforced the message of culture, creativity, and social harmony in urban life, connecting younger generations to their cultural roots.

This year's alpona celebrations across Dhaka -- from Shahabagh to Banani, Gulshan -- were more than just decorative art; they were a collective expression of identity and resilience. The night-long festivity, blending paintbrushes, performances, and community spirit, reaffirmed Pahela Baishakh as the cultural heartbeat of the city, where tradition and modernity meet on the streets in vibrant colour.

And until the colours fade, the festivity remains in the heart, reminding you of the red strokes you once painted at the turn of the road.

Mob beats man to death over robbery allegations

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pirojpur

A man was beaten to death by a mob during an attempted robbery in Pirojpur's Nazirpur upazila early yesterday.

The victim is Dulal, 26, from Hijla in Barishal, said Nazirpur Police Station Officer-in-Charge Tarikul Islam.

Quoting locals, the police official said a group of around eight men entered the house of college teacher Nazmul Hasan, also known as Ujjal, in Kalardonia village early Sunday and held the family hostage to try and rob the place.

At one point, Nazmul was attacked with a sharp weapon. He and his son Miskat were seriously injured and later taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Neighbours rushed in after hearing screams and managed to catch one of the gang members, Dulal. He was later beaten by locals, leaving him dead on the spot, the OC said.

He said they are working to identify and arrest the other suspects.

A case is being prepared in connection with the incident and the body has been sent for autopsy, OC Tarikul added.

Dulal was accused in at least 15 cases across different police stations, the OC said.

'Multiple' injured in midwestern US campus shooting: police

AFP, Washington

Police said "multiple" people were injured in a shooting at the University of Iowa early yesterday, after the midwestern US school issued an alert reporting gunshots in an area popular for nightlife.

The United States, where firearms are readily available, has a long history of gun violence that kills thousands of people every year.

"The Iowa City Police Department is investigating a shooting that occurred Sunday," Iowa City officials said in a statement, adding that "no arrests have been made."

"At this time, multiple victims have been taken to area hospitals to be treated for wounds suffered in the shooting."

Their conditions were unknown, authorities said. The ICPD said its officers responded to a report of a "large fight" on campus just before 2:00 am local time (0700 GMT), adding that officers arriving at the scene "heard gunfire."

Chasing the European dream, fraught with danger

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Bangladesh was at the top of the list of countries whose citizens arrived in Europe through the Mediterranean. At least 20,259 Bangladeshis reached Europe by sea, accounting for 30.5 percent of total arrivals -- far ahead of Egypt (9,115), Eritrea (7,583), Pakistan (4,397), and Sudan (4,223).

The trend persisted in the first two months of 2026, as Bangladesh again topped the list of sea arrivals to Europe with 1,358 entries, ahead of Somalia (557), Pakistan (383), and Egypt (317).

These figures come despite persistent reports that many Bangladeshis have been detained and physically abused in Libyan camps. Human trafficking gangs held many of them hostage to extort money from their families, while many others lost their lives during treacherous sea voyages from Libya to Europe.

In the latest such tragedy, at least 18 Bangladeshis died while trying to cross the Mediterranean from Libya to Greece. The incident came to light after a boat with several other Bangladeshis reached Greece on March 30.

Several officials of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) told this newspaper that around 70,000 people, mostly aged between 25 and 40, went to Europe via the notorious sea route over the last decade.

A significant number of them are from Madaripur, Shariatpur, Sunamganj, and Habiganj, where brokers continue to lure people with promises of jobs and a better life in Europe, they said.

A recent BRAC study found that 60 percent of the over 2,000 fortune seekers it surveyed had been promised good jobs, but 89 percent of them found no work after reaching Libya. At least 63 percent of them were detained along the way, and 93 percent of the detainees were held in camps. Among them, 79 percent suffered physical abuse.

According to the study, 68 percent said they lost their freedom of movement

after reaching Libya. About 54 percent said they never got three meals a day, while 22 percent said they received only one meal a day.

Most travelled from Dhaka to Libya through Dubai in the UAE and Egypt, while others travelled via Istanbul, Qatar, or Syria.

Shariful Hasan, associate director of BRAC's Migration Programme, said there has recently been a change in destination for Bangladeshi fortune seekers.

In recent months, many Bangladeshis who had earlier tried to enter Italy are now attempting to reach Greece from Libya, he pointed out.

"Our concern is that thousands more are now waiting in Libya for the same perilous journey," he told The Daily Star.

Trafficking networks, once concentrated in areas near Tripoli and Zuwara, have expanded across Libya's coastline. "New departure points, including Tobruk in the east, are increasingly being used to send boats towards Greece."

Shariful said the desperation to reach Europe is so intense that many Bangladeshis who were rescued during sea voyages remain unwilling to return home, even after their near-death experiences.

He called for stronger government action at home as well as greater engagement with Libya, Greece, and Italy to dismantle trafficking networks and prevent further deaths.

Migration expert Asif Munir said that a highly organised and powerful transnational network is involved in human trafficking through the Mediterranean, making it difficult for any single country to tackle the issue on its own.

"It can only be effectively curbed through coordinated efforts among all countries connected to this route," he told The Daily Star.

Munir also stressed the importance

of increasing public awareness and enforcing stricter immigration controls to tackle the issue more effectively.

Contacted, Md Nurul Haque Nur, state minister for expatriates' welfare and overseas employment, said the government has been carrying out awareness campaigns in areas where a significant number of people appear willing to embark on perilous journeys to Europe.

He said the campaigns are meant to warn people that these journeys carry grave risks and also damage Bangladesh's image abroad, as undocumented migration creates many problems for destination countries.

The state minister further said the government's legal scope for intervention remains limited because these migrants do not use formal channels.

CID officials said that over the last few years, there has been a rise in the number of human trafficking victims repatriated through initiatives by the Bangladesh embassy in Libya with support from the IOM.

At least 3,463 Bangladeshis were brought back home from Libya last year compared to 2,008 the previous year. The number was 646 in 2023 against 143 in 2022, according to a database of the Trafficking in Human Beings Unit of the CID.

Mohammad Badrul Alam Mollah, special superintendent of CID's Serious Crime Unit, said, "Thousands of Bangladeshis entered Europe last year through irregular routes, the highest in recent times. Several routes are being used to reach Italy via Dubai.

"In many cases, people fall prey to fraudulent syndicates that lure them with promises of quick and substantial earnings abroad. To address this, we are focusing on raising public awareness," he said, adding that campaigns have been launched and documentaries are being produced to highlight the dangers of perilous journeys to Europe.

"We depend on district administration and consumer rights bodies for field-level monitoring. We have asked companies to ensure that distributors and retailers sell at the correct price," he added.

However, M Shamsul Alam, energy adviser to the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB), rejected the basis of the latest hike, alleging that freight costs have been arbitrarily inflated without proper verification.

"It's all the business people's interests." He cited an earlier assessment by CAB that showed freight costs were much lower than the number quoted by the businesses.

"We presented documents and asked them to verify with NBR records and submissions made to courts, but that was not done. Instead, they took the highest prices quoted by a few companies and took their average.

"The market [price] has been distorted, and the BERC's role in enabling this is highly questionable," he said.

Fuel price hike lays bare stress on economy

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subsidies through higher taxes, borrowing or cuts in other spending, each carrying broader economic costs, he said.

Selling fuel below international prices, he argued, creates losses for the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation that ultimately fall on taxpayers.

"Keeping prices artificially low often leads to shortages, long queues and black markets, while price gaps with neighbouring countries encourage smuggling, meaning subsidised fuel may benefit consumers outside Bangladesh," he told this newspaper.

Zahid suggested targeted support such as cash transfers or vouchers to shield vulnerable households, citing global examples where direct aid proved more effective.

He warned that global fuel costs may remain elevated, making delayed adjustments more painful and prolonging supply pressures.

Energy expert Prof M Tamim, vice-chancellor of Independent University, Bangladesh, said the hike was justified and should have been implemented earlier.

Although the hike will lead to a rise in inflationary pressure as fuel costs feed into transport and production, he argued the impact was unavoidable given the subsidy burden.

He said people were expecting an adjustment next month, and were in a rush in panic buying.

Besides, keeping prices artificially low had encouraged hoarding and black-market sales, particularly after the government signalled in advance that prices could be raised.

Prof M Shamsul Alam, energy adviser to the Consumers Association of Bangladesh, criticised the decision to raise fuel prices as a "breach of

trust", saying the government had assured citizens that prices would not rise mid-month.

"By violating their own rule of monthly adjustments, they have undermined credibility," he said.

He said hoarding by some private suppliers was evident as supply increased immediately after the hike.

Yesterday, the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation instructed the state distribution companies Padma, Meghna, Jamuna to increase diesel and petrol supply by 10 percent and octane supply by 20 percent compared to last year's supply.

In April last year, average daily diesel supply was 11,862 tonnes, Octane 1,185 tonnes and petrol 1,374 tonnes.

From April 1-7 this year, amid uncertainties over import and increased global prices, the average daily supply of diesel was cut to 1,107 tonnes, octane 1,129 tonnes and petrol 1,253 tonnes, deepening the crisis at fuel pumps.

Compared to the first 17 days of April, the supply of diesel will now increase by 17.5 percent to 13,048 tonnes, octane by 25.9 percent to 1,422 tonnes, and petrol by 20.6 percent to 1,511 from today.

Shamsul also questioned why domestically produced petrol and octane were priced in line with imports.

"The BPC has long engaged in manipulations without accountability. Mismanagement has reached a point where the government itself is trapped, enabling profiteering by distribution companies," he said.

According to him, distribution companies are using profits from consumers to expand assets and pay bonuses, while inflated costs are built into pricing. "Without addressing

these issues, the government is repeating the mistakes of its predecessors," he warned.

Agricultural economist Jahangir Alam Khan highlighted severe risks for the farm sector, especially during the ongoing Boro season when irrigation demand peaks.

He said higher diesel prices are raising irrigation costs, while shortages and queues at filling stations are disrupting crop growth in the northern districts.

"Fuel cost increases will raise costs across the agricultural value chain, from irrigation to harvesting, transport, and marketing, driving up food inflation," he said.

He warned that reduced production could force rice imports, while fertiliser shortages caused by gas supply disruptions are compounding risks.

"Crops are now in critical growth stages, but fuel shortages are already drying fields. Higher kerosene prices will further strain rural households," he added.

Transport fares on both roads and waterways are also set to rise in response to the fuel price hike.

The Bangladesh Road Transport Authority held a meeting last evening to review public transport fares, though no new rates were finalised until the report was filed.

Transport owners' associations indicated they may propose raising fares to Tk 4 per kilometre in cities and Tk 3.80 for long-distance buses, which could mean up to a 64 percent increase in metropolitan fares.

Meanwhile, the Bangladesh Inland Waterway Passenger Transport Organisation has proposed a 36-42 percent hike in launch fares, including a higher minimum fare.

Hold the govt accountable for reform delivery

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"This lack of efficiency means there is no way to tell parliament what was promised with public money versus the actual outcome," Prof Sobhan said.

He noted that health and education budgets are consistently underutilised, with the allocated 2 percent not fully spent even as aspirations grow to raise public expenditure to 5-6 percent of GDP.

"There is a lack of practical analysis regarding why these ministries are underperforming, while citizens experience low-quality healthcare and poor-quality public education despite reports of high pass rates," he said.

According to him, these are no problems in planning reforms but in implementation and the way the state functions. Substantive reforms require identifying key players and building a coalition inside the government willing to make reforms a political campaign issue.

He cited the Six Point Programme as a genuine reform agenda during the Pakistani regime, which mobilised

citizens and culminated in the Liberation War of 1971.

In contrast, current reform agendas, such as the BNP's 31 points, have seen little effort to conscientise party members or voters, he said.

"Election manifestos are often paper exercises where members contesting elections would fail an exam on their party's content because they have no idea what it contains," he said.

Prof Sobhan added that in India, broad civil society coalitions were mobilised for reforms such as the right to food, education, and work. In Bangladesh, however, civil society representatives remain divided into fundraising silos and have not built such coalitions.

"Without mobilising constituencies on the ground to generate pressure on politicians and parliament, stronger coalitions who do not want reform will prevail," he warned.

He stressed that accountability must be built from the prime minister's office down to the grassroots, and reform must be institutionalised in the political DNA of Bangladesh.

CPD Distinguished Fellow Debapriya Bhattacharya said the interim administration was Bangladesh's most pro-reform government, but it failed to deliver reforms because it lacked an economic vision, an integrated design, and electoral legitimacy.

He added that while parliament has recommended reviewing ordinances on judiciary, corruption, and human rights, these should have been approved instead of shelved.

He emphasised that reforms should be pursued by the government itself rather than imposed by the World Bank or IMF.

Former finance secretary Mohammad Muslim Chowdhury suggested separating the local government civil service from the central civil service and integrating digitisation in service delivery to improve efficiency.

To combat politicisation of the bureaucracy, he advocated merit-based appointments and accountability at all stages.

SANEM Executive Director Selim Raihan moderated the session.