

In Bangladesh, a concert shows how creative freedom could transform the beleaguered nation

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The Shobar Age Bangladesh concert last week demonstrated the joy of diversity.

Hasan, who was once one of Bangladesh's most beloved and influential rock singers, made a long-awaited return to the stage on December 16, on the nation's Victory Day.

The rock icon had been absent from the stage for two decades, largely due to his refusal to conform to the demands of the autocratic regime of Sheikh Hasina, which ended in August following a massive uprising.

Hassan's return at the December 16 Shobar Age Bangladesh or Bangladesh First concert has sparked a wave of nostalgia and excitement, particularly after a viral video of him attempting to "fly" on stage, his arms stretched out like a bird at the start of his iconic song Jare Ja Ure Ja, Pakhi Tare Bole Ja - Birds, go fly away and tell her.

This powerful moment, shared widely on social media, has become a symbol of the cultural shift now sweeping through Bangladesh.

In many ways, this image captures the aspirations of a nation that, after years of political oppression, is finally free to spread its wings. The youthful energy and unrestrained joy reflected in Hassan's performance represent a broader transformation in Bangladesh - a nation where the long-sought taste of freedom is now within grasp.

It speaks to how the youth, newly liberated from the shadows of past regimes, are eager to take flight.

'Cultural fascism'

For years, Hasina's Awami League in Bangladesh has been accused of fostering what some have described as "cultural fascism". Unlike traditional forms of fascism defined by military control or direct violence, cultural fascism seeks to dominate ideologically and culturally, enforcing a singular narrative on citizens.

In this South Asian nation of 180 million, it began with the Awami League's adoption of what some claimed was Indian Bengali cultural hegemony, framed as progressivism and secularism. In reality, this shift gave rise to a cultural sphere that, despite its claims to being modern, suppressed diverse expressions and ideas.

This cultural ethos is based on a narrow, exclusionary vision of Bengali nationalism. Over time, it has

come to pervade all aspects of public life.

The process, often described as the “Awami-isation” of Bangladesh’s cultural life, reinforced the state’s dominance over society. Central to the expansion of this dominance was a media landscape largely controlled by the ruling Awami League, which amplified and sustained a singular, state-sanctioned narrative.

One of the clearest signs of this cultural dominance had been the gradual transformation of every national day in Bangladesh into an “Awami Day”. The country’s cultural calendar was reconstituted to advance the party’s agenda, with historical narratives crafted by intellectuals from across the border or Bangladeshis influenced by them.

For years, these intellectuals have played a pivotal role in molding Bangladesh’s cultural identity. This enforced cultural unity suppressed dissenting voices and ideas, promoting a singular, state-sanctioned narrative.

Breaking free

During the Awami era, events like the annual “Joy Bangla” concerts were a regular occurrence. While some artists found it convenient, even financially rewarding, to align with the ideology of the ruling party, others were coerced into compliance.

The Shobar Age Bangladesh concert, organised by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, broke the cultural monopoly of Awami League. Although organised by a political party, the event transcended its political roots. It drew hundreds of thousands of people from a variety of backgrounds, making it deeply symbolic for post-autocratic Bangladesh.

To those with a sense of history, the Shobar Age Bangladesh concert was a reminder of the Kagmari Cultural Conference of 1957. This national gathering played an incisive role in shaping the political landscape of the time. It contributed to the partition of Pakistan and laid the groundwork for the creation of an independent Bangladesh.

As the theorist Theodor Adorno noted, in an authoritarian system, the culture industry often serves to suppress the freedoms of people. In Bangladesh, the cultural sphere was refashioned to serve the interests of the ruling party. Those who opposed it were branded as enemies of the state.

Though the Hasina regime was forced to flee on August 5 after a mass uprising, years of living under such has left Bangladesh’s cultural landscape severely compromised.

Over the decades, several attempts have been made to create counter-cultures (some quite reactionary). But they failed to promote a spirit of harmony within Bangladesh’s diverse society.

One initiative, for instance, opposed the Rabindra Sangeet pan-Bengal musical form and instead championed qawwali, which was seen to be more Muslim. Of course, this did not contribute to creating a unified national culture. A true national culture does not emerge by focusing on a single segment of society - it thrives through integrating diverse voices.

This is precisely what happened at the Shobar Age Bangladesh concert, where musics from several genres got their space to enthrall audiences from a variety of backgrounds.

Culture, of course, encompasses far more than just music and dance - it represents a wide spectrum of human expression. Culture shapes a society’s collective psyche by reflecting and embodying its

values. The core difference between a democratic culture and an authoritarian culture lies in the values each culture promotes.

The struggle between the Awami League's cultural influence and the development of a democratic cultural identity for Bangladesh is, fundamentally, an ideological and philosophical battle. It is a contest to create a new national cultural consciousness - one that embraces diversity and upholds democratic principles.

For a democratic nation to thrive, it is essential for society to nurture a culture that reflects the values of national unity and dignity. Such a culture will gradually have an impact on citizens, especially the younger generation.

Sheikh Hasina's rule led to the socialisation of authoritarian values. For decades, rock icons such as Hasan and James were denied the freedom to showcase their work.

But true artistic freedom is crucial for the creation of exceptional art. At the Victory Day concert, Bangladesh caught a glimpse of that freedom - a small but significant peek. Only if the full scope of this freedom is granted to the people can Bangladesh realise its cultural and creative potential.

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