

# Shrinking Spaces

## An ode to the Bengal Classical Music Festival



SHAGUFE HOSSAIN

NOVEMBER has arrived. I have been looking forward to November since I came back mid this year. It is the month when rays of light

fall differently on your face, sound travels differently, sunshine thins, and the mist thickens.

November in Dhaka is also the month of festivals. The Dhaka Lit Fest, the Folk Fest, and the Bengal Classical Music Festival. It is the month that Dhaka comes alive. But this year, in what is arguably the biggest blow to the country's cultural development, the Bengal Classical Music Festival has been cancelled. This was supposed to be the sixth edition of the internationally acclaimed Bengal Classical Music Festival. Bengal Foundation, the organising body of the mega classical event, has cancelled the festival this year after failing to get Bangladesh Army Stadium as its venue.

It's a valid reason. The character of the festival, which has been created over the past five years, is largely dependent on the venue. The Bengal Foundation finalised the artistes' line-up, including top classical musical maestros from India, young and veteran classical artistes from Bangladesh, and other participants, and the dates of their trip by August this year. But as the organisers have pointed out, the army stadium is a secure venue for foreign artistes, and it is the promise of security that makes the event so coveted. Without it, the festival will not be the same.

Dhaka has been a gradually shrinking space. For quite some time now, glimpses of spontaneous movement, free, unabashed contact between people, have been rare. The day that the cancellation of



The iconic Vidushi Girija Devi, who passed away recently, was one of the main attractions of Bengal Classical Music Festival last year.

PHOTO: STAR

the event was announced, my colleagues and I went on a rant, unable to swallow the galling unfairness. In her rant, one of my colleagues exclaimed, "Over 50,000 people at an event and not one case of sexual harassment! Do you know how rare that is?" She wasn't wrong. It is painfully rare.

A recent poll conducted by Thomson Reuters Foundation stated that Dhaka ranked as the seventh most dangerous megacity for women. In the poll, which took into account sexual violence and cultural practices along with two other factors, Dhaka failed miserably. An ActionAid report found that the increased visibility of large numbers of women on the streets has led to increased levels of sexual violence and harassment in urban and public spaces. Sadly, deep-seated patriarchy has not let women's social status rise alongside their economic independence. Bangladeshi

women living in cities feel continuously unsafe and anxious for their own safety. Ten percent of women in cities feel unsafe in public spaces and 15 percent think public transport poses a danger. Rising reports of rapes on buses don't help either.

So when my colleague claimed she felt thwarted as a woman, and as a human being, she was more than justified in her feeling. And this year, it wasn't just a cultural festival that was compromised. For many of us, it was breathing space.

But it is not only a breathing space for the second sex that this space provides. In addition to dismantling gender barriers in its own subtle fashion, the space dismantles barriers of social class and poverty by providing access free of cost, inviting people across all walks of life to immerse themselves in culture that is a luxury

accessed and consumed by the rich.

The charm of ancient forms of music that were once passed down from father to son, mother to daughter, has been long lost on younger generations. But my father and I make a ritual of going together to this event every year, dismantling the barrier of a "generation gap".

This festival, the world's largest classical music festival in terms of the number of performers on a single stage, audience capacity and duration, sensitises the audience to a taste for quality music. A better appreciation and understanding of the fundamentals of music, which in the ancient Indian subcontinent originated from a diverse lineage, deeply rooted in spiritual and ethnic traditions. Music, which has been the bedrock of a shared culture in a subcontinent deeply divided for over 70 years. The festival serves as a testament to diversity.

And that is not all. Academic

research has suggested time and again that there is a strong correlation between dying cultural spheres and increase of extremism. In a working paper published by More Europe, a cultural civil initiative composed of a public-private partnership of foundations, civil society networks and national cultural institutes, a strong relationship between flourishing cultural spheres and the reduction of violent extremism was suggested. The individual and collective social capital that is created through arts, culture and cultural exchanges, the strengthened social networks, the cultural identity that is cultivated, all serve as tools for sustained tenacity.

The most crucial variable for individual and collective resilience, in the approach of several social scientists and counter-terrorism experts, is social capital. They distinguish between three levels of prevention: (i) primary prevention, addressing societies at large; (ii) secondary prevention, targeting particularly vulnerable groups; and (iii) tertiary prevention, focusing on already partially radicalised groups and individuals.

Artistic expressions, cultural projects and enhanced inter-cultural dialogue, research indicates, may operate as valuable tools on all three levels.

So, in a city of shrinking spaces, where men and women, the young and the old, the rich and the poor, struggle to breathe, the Bengal Classical Music Festival far exceeds its purpose of simply nurturing the traditions of music in Bangladesh. It transcends into an expanding, living, thriving space that dismantles many boundaries, giving room to breathe.

Shagufe Hossain is the founder of Leaping Boundaries and a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

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### PROJECT SYNDICATE

# Fake news and biased news

#### THE ASIAN CONVERGENCE



KOICHI HAMADA

INTERVIEWS are always tricky. If an unscrupulous interviewer is looking for a particular answer or claim, they have the power to edit,

manipulate, or even rewrite their subject's words to that end. That is why I have long taken pains to check carefully quotations attributed to me by the media. But, when it comes to television or radio interviews, it seemed to me that such distortions would be more difficult to pull off. I was wrong.

Not long ago, representatives from a Japanese television programme associated with a liberal-leaning newspaper requested an interview with me to discuss Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's economic-reform strategy, known as "Abenomics." I was interviewed for about an hour, with my answers to be included in an episode centred on a panel discussion held in the studio.

The result was not what I expected. To be sure, I wasn't entirely shocked to find that the panellists denied the recent achievements of Abenomics and espoused the strange view that monetary policy cannot boost an economy, and yet can suddenly cause hyperinflation. Such claims have persisted, despite the ongoing monetary-policy-driven, low-inflation recoveries in the United States, Europe, and Japan.

But the distortion of my own words



was significant. In my interview, I highlighted the successes of Abenomics. And I argued that a strong labour market and rising business profits would be among Abenomics' enduring legacies, even if Abe's administration faced political challenges. The programme included just two minutes of my interview, emphasising the part about the potential political challenges,

rather than Abenomics' great successes. In recent years, much attention has been devoted to "fake news"—outright disinformation that spreads widely, often through social media or other online platforms. But my recent experience highlighted another danger: biased news, in which strategic edits surreptitiously advance the views of a journalist, editor, or broadcaster.

Such reporting, which may be delivered even by traditional news organisations, can be very damaging, not least for political leaders. Without a doubt, Abe's political standing has been vulnerable to the effects of biased journalism.

For example, several months ago, Abe was addressing a crowd gathered in Akihabara, a district of Tokyo. A number of attendees, in a clear attempt to sabotage his speech, booed and heckled relentlessly. Eventually, Abe shouted, "I am not addressing a crowd shouting like you!" The next day, his words were reported widely; the behaviour of the crowd, however, was not, leaving readers with the impression that their prime minister had, completely unprompted, yelled coarsely at Japanese citizens.

Similar distortions characterised accounts of hearings in Japan's Diet to investigate allegations, originally made by former Vice Minister of Education and Science Kihei Maekawa, that Abe rigged the decision-making process behind the opening of a new veterinary department at a university run by a close friend of his. Not only did Abe himself deny the accusations; Tatsuo Hatta, formerly of Osaka University, and Moriuyuki Kato, former Governor of Ehime Prefecture, testified that the process had been conducted fairly and lawfully.

Yet many media organisations, including two leading newspapers, *Asahi* and *Mainichi*, continued to report

on the supposed scandal—leaving out the testimony of Hatta and Kato, while providing an extensive account of Maekawa's accusations.

Such biased reporting can easily turn voters against a leader. Fortunately for Japan, its voters have not been duped. Abe just scored a landslide victory in the general election on October 22, easily returning his ruling coalition to power.

In the United States, by contrast, biased news stories, especially on social media, appear to be having a powerful effect on voters, and have propelled political polarisation to unprecedented levels. This is particularly true with regard to President Donald Trump, who has repeatedly attacked the media—often wrongly, to be sure—for its coverage of his administration.

Trump, who has been known to disseminate problematic news himself, is no innocent victim of media bias. But the state of US politics today does highlight the need for voters everywhere to have access to complete and objective accounts of what is happening in their country and the world. Only then will they be truly empowered, as a democratic system requires, to make informed choices about their collective future.

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(Exclusive to The Daily Star)

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### A WORD

### A DAY



**GAMBOL**  
verb

To skip or leap about joyfully

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

#### ACROSS

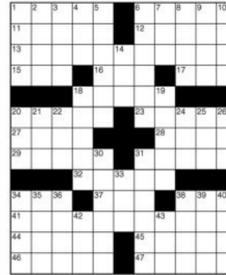
- 1 Contradict
- 6 Evil spirit
- 11 Squirrel's find
- 12 Unlike zombies
- 13 Uncredited author
- 15 Soak up
- 16 Harry's friend
- 17 Termination
- 18 In the buff
- 20 Jazz genre
- 23 River part
- 27 Steel ingredient
- 28 Money for release
- 29 Witch transport
- 31 Mummy's place
- 32 One of the Obama daughters
- 34 Inquire
- 37 Midnight, on a

#### clock

- 18 Taboo acts
- 19 Messing of "Will & Grace"
- 20 Feeding time need
- 21 Bungle
- 22 Halloween cry
- 24 Put down
- 25 Service reward
- 26 PC key
- 30 Upper limits
- 31 Hot peppers
- 33 Remain unused
- 34 Concerning
- 35 Unwanted email
- 36 Toy with a tail
- 38 Track shape
- 39 Goat cheese
- 40 Hightailed it
- 42 Weaver's creation
- 43 History stretch

#### DOWN

- 1 Luggage
- 2 Cave sound
- 3 Velcro feature
- 4 Tax org.
- 5 Catch
- 6 Fixed socks
- 7 New Haven student
- 8 Spider's kin
- 9 Chef's need
- 10 Bookish sort
- 14 Stir-fry pan



### YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

P I C S I R A S  
D O N H O W I T C H  
O T T E R O P E R A  
G H O S T S O A T  
M E N S P I N U P S  
A R E P I R A T E  
A A R O N  
G O B L I N B A T  
S U N S E T M O N A  
E L L S P O O K S  
E L I T E A N G L E  
D E V I L S T I E S  
T E E M T E E S

### BEETLE BAILEY

### BY MORT WALKER



### BABY BLUES

### BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

