

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Police must be de-politicised, pro-people

An independent police commission is the only answer

We are in total agreement with the participants at *The Daily Star's* roundtable on police reforms that the police can never be again abused for political gains. The speakers at the event, including lawyers, politicians, academics and the current and former police officials, were forthright in their criticisms and recommendations for a pro-people force. But the key takeaway from the discussions is that an independent commission is crucial for true reforms to take place.

Given the proper mandate and resources, an independent commission would help free the police from political manipulation, allow them to carry out their duties by strictly adhering to the law. It would improve accountability by making sure that police misconduct is fairly investigated without external interference. It would establish professional standards for promotions and make the police a people-friendly force. It would also strengthen public trust by ensuring that human rights are protected in all interactions and that citizens' complaints are addressed.

As discussed at the roundtable, although the Police Reform Commission made some important recommendations, none of them were even discussed in the National Consensus Commission's series of talks with political parties. According to an NCC member, although all political parties agreed to have an independent police commission during the talks, the home ministry opposed the idea. This is disappointing and puzzling. Furthermore, earlier this month, the interim government announced the establishment of two commissions for the police: the Independent Investigation Services, headed by the law adviser, and the Internal Complaints Commission, headed by the home adviser. Essentially, both the commissions will be controlled by the government. How this will truly make the police force free of political influence can be called to question.

However, we are heartened by the candidness with which representatives of some main political parties spoke about the need to de-politicise the police force. During the past regime, we saw how the government used the police force to persecute opposition activists and ordinary citizens. The cold-blooded killing of protesters by police and other forces during the mass uprising last year was the grossest example of manipulation. Politicisation has also led to corruption pervading the forces. Extortion, torture, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearance and custodial death over the decades have given the police force a frightening image. The flurry of false or flimsy cases and increase in mob violence in recent times has also resulted in public trust in the police drop to an all-time low. Meanwhile, police morale and efficiency have also nosedived.

Police reform can only be truly meaningful and effective through a body that is completely unbiased and professional. Only an independent police commission can ensure that. Hence, the government must ensure that the commission remains free of any and all outside influence—political or otherwise.

Ensure security during Durga Puja

Govt must give special attention to 29 districts flagged vulnerable

Drawing on a decade of media and rights-group documentation, a civic platform named Sampriti Jatra has identified 29 districts as vulnerable to potential communal unrest and targeted violence during the upcoming Durga Puja festivities. Among them, five districts—Dhaka, Rangpur, Jashore, Chandpur and Noakhali—have been categorised as high-risk, while 24 others have been marked moderately vulnerable. These findings should serve as a wake-up call for the authorities, who must gear up to ensure maximum security across the country during the puja festivities.

Sampriti Jatra's findings also highlight a disturbing new trend: religious sites beyond Hindu temples are increasingly under threat. According to media reports, nearly 80 attacks on shrines and dargahs took place within the first six months of the interim government alone, while police records cite 44 attacks on 40 shrines between August 2024 and January 2025. Although discrepancies may exist between official data and the ground reality, the trajectory remains concerning.

Speakers at the platform's press conference, including researchers and cultural activists, expressed frustration over the government's inability to curb extremist attacks and mob violence. They alleged that such incidents were getting normalised through silence, delayed intervention, lack of proper investigation, and absence of justice. This echoes the experience of past years, when no effective trial or redress followed incidents of communal violence. Without visible accountability, perpetrators are emboldened, and minority communities are left to live in fear.

This year, preparations are underway to organise Durga Puja in more than 33,000 mandaps and temples across the country—up from over 31,000 last year, including 258 sites in Dhaka. The interim government has allocated Tk 5 crore in grants for this year's celebrations, but the funds—ranging from Tk 5,000 to Tk 15,000 per mandap—cannot, by themselves, ensure security. It is imperative that the authorities treat Sampriti Jatra's findings with due importance and hash out a plan that includes preventive deployment, community engagement, and rapid-response mechanisms. Police and local administrations must coordinate with puja committees to secure mandaps, processions, and vulnerable neighbourhoods, particularly those 29 districts. In addition, the government must demonstrate that communal violence will no longer be met with impunity. Only sound, preventive actions can ensure a smooth, peaceful celebration of Durga Puja.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

The Iran-Iraq War begins

On this day in 1980, the Iran-Iraq War began when Iraqi armed forces invaded western Iran along the countries' joint border. The fighting continued until 1988, and a formal peace agreement was signed in 1990.



Without songs, the soul is a desert



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin is joint editor at *The Daily Star*.

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

A refrain from a well-known old film song loops in my head: *“Baba bole gelo/ Ar kono din gaan koro na/ Keno bole gelo/ Shey kotha ti bole gelo na/ Gaan jodi prithibi te nai thakto/ ‘sa re ga ma pa dha ni sa’ ki kore hoto!”*

Written by Amjad Hossain, composed by Alauddin Ali and sung by Shamima Yasmin Diba, this catchy tune from *Jonmo Theke Jolchhi* once seemed silly to me as a child, fuel for parody and inside jokes in the family. Only now do I understand its quiet heartbreak.

The song grieves the imagined loss of music, asking: if singing is forbidden, why have so many songs been written about the children we have lost? It insists that songs are not just entertainment but a vehicle for mourning, protest, inspiration, and memory. The message of that film song is that music is vital to human expression and resistance; without it, the world loses something fundamental. Without music, the soul becomes a desert.

I remember the overwhelming emotion when thousands sang

To argue that music causes moral decay is not only baseless—it’s dangerous. Music comforts us in sorrow, amplifies our joy, inspires empathy, and ignites protest. It makes us more human. To claim that it threatens our values is to deny the very foundation of our cultural and spiritual heritage.

“Dhono Dhanne Pushpe Bhora” during the protests in July-August last year. I think of the brave voices of the Bangladesh Mukti Sangrami Shilpi Sangstha in 1971, the young artistes singing in the refugee camps and on the battlefronts to lift spirits and



VISUAL: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

unify a nation. Their work, captured in *Muktir Gaan*, a documentary by Catherine and Tareq Masud based on footage captured by American filmmaker Lear Levin, remains a testament to music's power in the fight against oppression.

There are other songs we grew up with that still echo in our minds. Sabina Yasmin singing: *“Shob kota janala khule dao na/ Ami gaibo, gaibo bijoyeri gaan/ Ora ashbe/ Chupi chupi...”* The thunderous notes from a fiery chorus of *“Purbo digontey surjo uthechhe...”*

Growing up in the 70s and 80s Dhaka, singing the national anthem in school assemblies, taking part in dance dramas, going to music class to learn our “sa re ga ma”—all these were routine for most Bangalee middle-class families. At the same time, Muslim children had Arabic teachers who taught the teachings of the Quran, prayers, and the basics of Islam. Music and religion were never in conflict. They coexisted. They have

and replaced with religious teacher appointments to “foster morality and values.”

But what would Bangladesh be without Lalon Shah, Abbasuddin Ahmed, Shah Abdul Karim? Without Rabindra Sangeet, Nazrul Geeti, or those unforgettable *adhunik* (modern) numbers that are still sung and heard with nostalgia? Without voices like Shahnaz Rahmatullah, Runa Laila, Farida Parveen, Ajit Roy, Feroza Begum, Abdul Jabbar, Abdul Alim, or Sanjida Khatun? Without the strings strummed by Ustad Allauddin Khan, Ustad Barin Mazumder, or Ustad Khadem Hossain Khan?

What if young people never heard the music of Souls, Miles, Joler Gaan, Chirkutt, Shunno, Nagar Baul, Artcell, Warfaze, or Aurthohin? What if there had been no Azam Khan, Lucky Akhand, Ayub Bachchu, or James?

Can we even imagine such a Bangladesh, devoid of its rich musical heritage?

One group has declared that

been no objection to this, nor have there been rallies to ban religious education.

So why this outcry over music teachers?

The irony is that the most beautiful religious expressions, such as the recitation of scripture, hamd, naath, qawwali, and even waaz mehfil, come through melody. Music has long been a part of religious life in this region.

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Pitting religion against music is misleading and divisive. To say music undermines morality is a deliberate attempt to erase the syncretic traditions that define us. This is not just an attack on music; it is an attack on who we are as Bangladeshis.

WORLD CAR FREE DAY

Cities for people... or cars?



Debra Efroymsen is executive director of the Institute of Wellbeing, Bangladesh, and an active member of the Carfree Cities Alliance.

DEBRA EFROYMSON

Imagine that you were a car, not a person. How different would life be for you in Dhaka? Your housing would be assured. You would be given priority outdoors, able to move around and idle where you choose. If you happened to run someone over, there would likely be no punishment for you or your driver; it would be framed as an “unfortunate accident.” Rather than suffering from traffic and pollution, you would be helping to cause it.

This might seem a ridiculous proposition, but when we take a step back and look at how we organise our cities, the question does reasonably arise: are we designing urban space for people or for cars? Cars get affordable housing, which is in short supply for human beings. Cars are sold in car *haats* organised on playgrounds, and parked there as well, while there are not nearly enough such fields for people. Cars sleep comfortably in parking lots; if children try to play near them, they are warned away due to fear of damage to the vehicles. We complain about congestion and pollution, yet continue to welcome ever-increasing

numbers of cars on our streets. We mourn those killed on the roads, yet seem unable to understand that a vehicle weighing a tonne or more, when travelling over 30 kilometres an hour, will occasionally cause fatalities, regardless of what we do to prevent them.

Every year on September 22, cities around the world celebrate World Car Free Day. In Europe, they celebrate European Mobility Week from September 16 to September 22. It is a good opportunity to reflect on life in our cities and how we can improve it. As an optimist, I am convinced we could do much better—if we ever decided to value people more than cars, and to understand just how much we give up for the sake of our cars.

I have given a TEDx talk on this topic, where I mention a few examples of what we sacrifice for the sake of our cars: time spent earning money to buy cars, then wasted in congestion caused by our cars; children robbed of their childhood, unable to walk or cycle to school or to play outdoors; the

more than one million people killed each year in road crashes (and tens of millions more injured), the trillions of dollars of subsidies to fossil fuels—when we should be weaning ourselves off of them instead of subsidising them.

I also talk about some of the positive global trends, such as the cities that are

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reining in cars in different ways. This includes regular car-free events, the biggest being Bogotá's Ciclovía, which liberates 120 km of roads from cars for several hours each Sunday and holiday; cities that actually reward rather than punish those on foot and bicycle; and

the many European cities that have made much of their downtowns free of motorised vehicles. Barcelona's superblocs, which greatly restrict car use and convert intersections into plazas, are a hot topic of conversation for those wishing to create urban areas that are quieter, cooler, and less polluted.

Admittedly, the more time I spend tracking US politics, the less faith I have in basic human intelligence; nevertheless, I would like to believe that at some point there will be a mass awakening from the madness that we have inflicted on ourselves in the name of the comfort and convenience of automobile. That someday we will realise that the price of our cars—in terms of time, money, space, human and animal life, and the climate crisis—is just too high, especially given that we could make our cities vastly more liveable if we dramatically reduced or eliminated the use of cars. It won't be easy—but neither is it easy to survive in our existing cities, as Dhaka residents can easily attest.

In any case, if idealism and hope are a crime, I'd rather be guilty of them than to accept that our existing polluted, congested, anti-social cities are the best we can do. And I hope that others will join me in these reflections (and watch my TEDx talk!) as we celebrate World Car Free Day and all the possibilities that could become reality if we were to dramatically reduce cars in our cities.