

The age-old debate over celebrities in politics

Will perception change?



DESIGN: DOWEL BISWAS

The long-standing debate over whether celebrities should join politics has once again become relevant — particularly in the context of the 13th parliamentary election, where, despite widespread buzz around celebrity engagement as voters and their noticeable participation in promotional campaigns, no major showbiz personality stood as a candidate this year. The absence is striking in a country where cultural figures have previously transitioned into formal political roles.

SHARMIN JOYA

Many artistes have faced backlash for switching party support or for their prior political involvement. Before the election, singer Rabi Chowdhury, for instance, had to explain his participation in Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) promotions in Dhaka-17 after previously supporting singer and former MP Momtaz for Awami League. He stressed that he is "not an agent" and acted solely at fellow artistes' requests, not for personal gain. "I sing when invited, irrespective of the party," he told Prothom Alo. Payments received were for performances, not campaigning, reflecting civic responsibility rather than political ambition.

At the same time, actors Shimla, Omar Sami, and others faced similar scrutiny, highlighting the tension between personal choice and public judgment. They were trolled for switching their support and tagged as "opportunists".

Allegations of misuse of influence persist, from lobbying for film grants and National Awards to forming industry syndicates, though these claims remain unsubstantiated and lack valid evidence.

Over the years, celebrities have undeniably been drawn into politics, sometimes for personal benefit. Actor Azmeri Haque Badhan bravely admitted to the media her association with the "power abusers". She claimed, "I personally witnessed the corruption and manipulation in the 2018 and 2024 elections. To be honest, I was also a part of it... because I was actively involved in the campaigns and very close to key figures of the previous government," referring to the Awami League. Her candid admission is commendable, a practice that reflects both political awareness and accountability—traits many of her colleagues avoid discussing.

Historically, celebrities have found both opportunities and challenges in Bangladeshi politics. After a long wait of seventeen years,

veteran singers Baby Naznin, Kanak Chapa, Monir Khan, Asif Akbar, and Nazmun Munira Nancy were speculated to receive BNP nominations this election, but none were ultimately fielded. Many of these artistes opened up after the July uprising about the repression and neglect they faced for supporting particular political banners, which even hampered their careers.

In contrast, the previous Awami League-led parliament featured numerous representatives from entertainment and sports, including the late actor Farooque (Akbar Hossain Pathan, 1948-2023), actor and cultural activist Asaduzzaman Noor, who was elected as a member of parliament multiple times, and former cricketer Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, all of whom were widely loved by the public.

In the 2024 national election, actor Ferdous Ahmed and cricketer Shakib Al Hasan won their respective seats with strong public support, yet the subsequent political transition prevented them from enjoying a full parliamentary tenure.

The perceived 'opportunistic' faces of celebrities were on display during the July Uprising, when several artistes were accused of blindly supporting the ruling party instead of speaking against the killings of innocents amid unrest.

Controversial incidents in the past and the absence of celebrity participation in this election creates a linkage and brings questions—Are political parties recalibrating strategies? Has public perception of celebrity-politicians shifted? Or are artistes themselves reconsidering the risks of crossing into partisan politics?

Popularity and emotional capital often translate into political influence in Bangladesh. Parties frequently rely on well-known figures to attract youth and floating voters, boost cultural legitimacy, and gain media visibility.

Yet celebrity involvement carries reputational risks, as public assessment often

judges political choices more harshly than artistic achievements.

Several Bangladeshi artistes argue that remaining beyond politics allows them to preserve neutrality and trust. Ekushey Padak-winning icon Babita has stated she is strictly against artistes joining politics, warning that it may compromise integrity and push them into corruption. "Why would artistes join politics? I don't like this at all! They must remain in art, not in politics," she said to the media.

On the other hand, veteran singer Asif Akbar is open about his motivations. "Politics runs in my family. I was the youngest member of BNP's central executive committee and one of its most loyal supporters. I have been a lifelong admirer of Shaheed Ziaur Rahman, and my support for BNP is rooted in respect for him rather than personal gain... I have never flattered or pandered to anyone, and I never will."

Globally, entertainers who enter politics often face scepticism. Ronald Reagan moved from acting to become Governor of California and later the 40th US President, proving the "just an entertainer" label wrong. Volodymyr Zelenskyy, a comedian and actor, became President of Ukraine and showed strong leadership during a crisis. In South Asia, M G Ramachandran (1917-1987), N T Rama Rao (1923-1996), and J Jayalalithaa (1948-2016) turned their film fame into political power, showing that artistes can also govern. Often, criticism reflects society's concern over celebrity influence rather than real political ability.

Restricting artistes based on profession alone risks narrowing democratic representation. Professionals from journalism, law, medicine, or religious leadership routinely transition into politics. Why should entertainers be barred? Integrity, competence, and vision matter more than celebrity status. Political misconduct is determined by character, not fame.

The stereotype of calling politics "bad" will only change once it is practiced consciously by all. As Aristotle observed, "Man is by nature a political animal." In Bangladesh, where cultural figures wield immense trust and influence, the intersection of arts and politics remains compelling. Whether through direct participation or civic engagement, artistes can contribute meaningfully to societal and political transformation — if the public and parties judge them on ability, not image.

Young leaders like Nahid Islam, Hasnat Abdullah, Tasnim Jara, and Monisha Chakraborty show that political commitment and public service can come from diverse backgrounds, encouraging fresh entrants to participate despite politics' heavy stigma of corruption, extortion, and power abuse.

At its core, politics should be about patriotism, integrity, and giving a voice to those who cannot speak for themselves. The tension between this ideal and public perception makes the debate over leadership and who belongs in politics so pressing.

The debate continues. Politics carries risks for everyone, but the focus should be on moral clarity, competence, and dedication to public service — not the glamour of past achievements. Artistes, like citizens from any profession, deserve the right to engage in politics without stigma, as long as their aim is to serve the nation.



Chanchal debuts as playback singer for his Tollywood film

Alongside acting, Chanchal Chowdhury is also known for his singing. At almost any event, he is often requested to perform a song. He has also been seen covering popular songs by various artistes.

Now, for the first time, Chanchal Chowdhury has sung for a Kolkata film. His voice will be heard in Bratya Basu's film *Shekor*. This marks Chanchal's debut as a playback singer in a movie.

Chanchal has recorded two songs for the film *Shekor*. The production house Friends Communication shared the update on social media yesterday.

Chanchal Chowdhury has re-recorded two popular Baul songs for the film *Shekor*. One is Bijoy Sarkar's "Ei Prithibi Jemon Ache Temni Thik Robe" and the other is Gostho Gopal Das's "O Jibon Re Chhariya Na Jao More."

ARUNDHATI ROY walks out of Berlin Film Festival over Gaza stance

Indian author Arundhati Roy has pulled out of the Berlin Film Festival after the event's organisers refused to speak about the war in Gaza.

Arundhati Roy, who won the prestigious Booker Prize in 1997, said she was "shocked and disgusted" by comments made at a press conference on Thursday.



During the press conference, jury president Wim Wenders was asked about the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. He responded by saying cinema should "stay out of politics." Another jury member called it "unfair" to expect them to take a position on the issue.

She was to present a restored version of her 1989 film *In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones* in the festival, which marked Shah Rukh Khan's debut.

The Berlin Film Festival is known for addressing political and social issues, making the jury's refusal to comment on Gaza particularly controversial.

'In Search of Heritage': Artists revisit Varendra at Gallery Chittrak

AISHWARYA RAIHAN

Gallery Chittrak is currently hosting *In Search of Heritage: A Travel to Varendra*, a group exhibition by some of the country's most celebrated artists, led by Professor Emeritus Rafiqun Nabi. The exhibition draws from their recent journey to the Varendra region of Chapainawabganj and surrounding areas.

Artist Prof Syed Abul Barq Alvi, Chairperson of Durjoy Bangladesh Foundation Durjoy Rahman, Vice Chairperson of DBL Group M A Rahim Feroz, and Chairperson of Pashmi Sweaters Limited Md Mashiul Azam attended the inauguration as special guests. Rafiqun Nabi and his wife, Nazma Begum, jointly inaugurated the exhibition on January 30, 2026.

Born in Chapainawabganj, Rafiqun Nabi spent his childhood between his maternal and paternal grandparents' homes, absorbing the rural beauty of the region; an experience that shaped his artistic sensibility. Seeking to reconnect with those roots, he led a group of fellow artists, whom he fondly described as "always easily convinced", on a creative expedition across Varendra.

The participating artists include Prof Syed Abul Barq Alvi, Mahfuzur Rahman, Rezaun Nabi, Ahmed Shamsuddoha, Sheikh Afzal, Nisar Hossain, Shishir Bhattacharjee, Muniruzzaman, and Shamsul Alam Innan.

The exhibition unfolds like a visual travel diary. The iron-rich reddish-



brown soil, rural landscapes, animals, architecture, and the indigenous communities of Varendra feature prominently. Prof Nabi, known for his figure drawings, portrayed local inhabitants and families engaged in everyday life. A child eating watermelon evokes the familiar warmth of his illustrations once seen in Bangla textbooks.

Ahmed Shamsuddoha's portrait of a Santal man and his home, along with pastoral scenes of cattle in open fields, are rendered with striking realism. Mahfuzur



Rahman's top views and façade studies reflect architectural precision.

Prof Alvi presented abstract compositions in soothing palettes, while Rezaun Nabi employed translucent strokes to capture rural simplicity. His understated portraits, including that of a Santal woman and a family on a bicycle; bring warmth to the gallery space. Sheikh Afzal painted a Santal woman alongside a scene of the artists walking along the banks of the Mahananda River.

Shishir Bhattacharjee depicted Santal homes and cultural elements, while Nisar



PHOTOS: AISHWARYA RAIHAN

Hossain highlighted the abundance of mangoes in Chapainawabganj through bold forms. Shamsul Alam Innan illustrated mango-picking traditions, and Muniruzzaman used muted grey tones to portray Varendra's landscape and people.

Overall, the exhibition not only reflects the topography and cultural richness of Varendra but also showcases the distinct artistic expressions of some of Bangladesh's most established artists.

The exhibition will run until February 20, 2026, at Gallery Chittrak.



WHAT'S THE HAPS?

'Rashomon'

Open Space Theatre brings a powerful stage adaptation of *Rashomon*, inspired by the stories of Ryunosuke Akutagawa and the iconic cinematic vision of Akira Kurosawa. Directed by M Arifur Rahman, the production explores truth, memory, and the shifting nature of human perspective through layered storytelling and intense dramatic performance. Audiences can expect a thought-provoking theatrical experience that questions reality and moral judgment.

Date: Friday | Feb 20

Time: 4 pm & 7 pm

Venue: Experimental Theatre Hall, BSA