

Who will safeguard Bangladesh's cultural future?

Bangladesh's cultural heritage will continue to face many risks, including political volatility, climate impacts, urban expansion, and economic shifts. While these threats may not disappear, the system's capacity to anticipate, mitigate, and respond to them can change. Beyond symbolic gestures, strengthening the cultural sector is about building institutional resilience, protecting livelihoods, reinforcing social cohesion, and preserving the diversity that defines Bangladesh's identity.

BY RAIYAAN MAHBUB

As Bangladesh enters a new chapter of democratic governance, the government faces high expectations to focus on economic recovery, political stability, and equitable development while navigating a new global crisis. While these urgent priorities dominate discourse around sustainable development, Bangladesh's culture sector risks being overlooked in mainstream development policy initiatives.

Within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), culture is acknowledged as an important factor contributing to multiple goals, such as inclusive cities (SDG 11), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), gender equality (SDG 5), environmental sustainability (SDG 13), and, very critically, building peace (SDG 16). Cultural heritage, creative industries, and sustainable cultural tourism serve as strategic tools for economic development, social cohesion, and environmental stewardship. Therefore, active government efforts are needed to support the culture sector through the protection of sites, practices, and cultural livelihoods, and, more importantly, through the development of a long-term vision and strategy for the sector.

The government is inheriting a complex legacy of cultural governance and management systems in Bangladesh. While the country's cultural sector has demonstrated remarkable resilience, it faces numerous pressures that pose challenges across cultural domains. Socio-political tensions and security threats frequently put heritage assets, practitioners, and communities at risk. Rapid urbanisation and infrastructure development have put pressure on the preservation of historic sites, while environmental challenges and climate change threaten both built and living heritage. These pressures are exacerbated by systemic issues in the protection, management, and safeguarding of Bangladesh's cultural heritage. Documentation



The empty pedestal at Shoshi Lodge in Mymensingh, where a statue of Venus was heavily vandalised and damaged on August 5, 2024.

security emerged over this period, significantly compromising their well-being. Women and rural practitioners were disproportionately affected by these disruptions, exposing deeper structural inequalities in access to institutional support and protection mechanisms. These incidents were not isolated, and they revealed deeper systemic vulnerabilities in how Bangladesh manages, safeguards, and

archival materials occurred during security breaches, while the absence of comprehensive inventories and digitised documentation significantly hindered tracking and recovery efforts. In the aftermath of incidents, damaged structures were further exposed to deterioration caused by rain, humidity, mould, and debris, demonstrating the absence of stabilisation protocols and emergency response mechanisms.

Impacts on living heritage and the cultural and creative industries were equally profound. Festivals, rituals, theatre productions, concerts, exhibitions, and fairs were widely cancelled or postponed because of security threats, curfews, and restricted mobility. The disruption of events and performance spaces greatly reduced community creative exchange and livelihoods. Many practitioners reported intimidation or harassment that discouraged public participation, fostering self-censorship and withdrawal from cultural activities. Income streams collapsed across both traditional and contemporary domains, as event-based earnings, production cycles in music and film, and associated supply chains were severely interrupted. Audience attendance declined sharply because of fear and economic uncertainty, undermining both the social fabric and financial sustainability of cultural events. Taken together, these findings reveal not only the impacts of the crisis but also structural deficiencies in security, safeguarding systems, livelihood protections, stakeholder coordination, and preparedness

and livelihood restoration. The action plan is grounded in findings from the rapid assessment and informed by consultations with government representatives, cultural practitioners, community representatives, and institutional stakeholders. The resulting recommendations reflect both field-based evidence and sectoral expertise to support immediate recovery while strengthening the long-term resilience of the culture sector.

What is now required is a shift from reactive crisis management to institutionalised resilience. UNESCO's Action Plan emphasises the need for a coordinated national framework for cultural protection and emergency preparedness. This includes strengthening security systems and surveillance at vulnerable heritage sites, conducting systematic risk assessments, and establishing clearer coordination mechanisms between cultural institutions, local administrations, and law enforcement agencies during crises. It also underscores the urgent need for comprehensive documentation and digitisation of heritage assets through updated inventories, registries, and digital backup systems, ensuring that artefacts, collections, and cultural records can be properly monitored, protected, and recovered in the event of disruptions. Alongside physical heritage protection, the recommendations recognise that safeguarding living heritage requires maintaining the continuity of cultural practices, including strengthening community-level transmission spaces and ensuring that festivals, rituals, and

that sustain both community identity and local economies. At the governance level, the plan emphasises stronger legal and policy frameworks, improved institutional coordination between national and district authorities, and the integration of culture into broader disaster risk reduction and development planning.

Ultimately, the Action Plan aims not only to address the immediate needs that arose from the 2024 crisis but also to develop and establish long-term systems for Bangladesh's cultural heritage and creative sectors. Safeguarding heritage, protecting creative expression, and securing livelihoods cannot be treated as isolated interventions. They must be integrated into national development planning and disaster risk reduction frameworks so that culture is recognised not as an afterthought, but as a foundational pillar of resilience and sustainable development.

A window of opportunity

The formation of the new government is a pivotal moment, as political transitions provide rare opportunities to recalibrate systems. This government inherits not only the responsibility of governing the culture sector, but also the stewardship of Bangladesh's cultural legacy and creative economy. In its election manifesto, the new administration articulated ambitions to strengthen the cultural and creative sectors as part of its broader national development agenda. Such commitments are timely and welcome. However, aspirational visions must be grounded in the structural realities of existing systems and seek productive reforms.

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The lessons from the impact of the 2024 Uprising make one point clear: safeguarding culture requires more than reactive responses to crises. It requires proactive investment in systems, coordination, and preparedness. As Bangladesh charts its democratic future, embedding cultural resilience into national development strategies will not only protect heritage but also strengthen the foundations of inclusive and sustainable growth.

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Armed security personnel guard a Janmashtami parade, demonstrating the significant infrastructure required to ensure the safety of cultural and religious programmes.

and information within the cultural sector remain limited, and disaster preparedness protocols, preventive measures, and security systems are often absent, misaligned, or inconsistent, leaving vital heritage assets vulnerable, with insufficient resources and knowledge to respond. Additionally, mechanisms to support livelihoods in the cultural sector are limited, with few formal safety nets, limited institutional support, and no contingency frameworks in place to mitigate economic or social disruption. From a governance and management perspective, Bangladesh has frequently struggled to address these challenges because of limitations in existing policy and institutional frameworks.

These gaps in the cultural sector were particularly exposed during the Mass Uprising of 2024 and the subsequent period of the interim government, which marked a moment of significant socio-political transformation. While the movement reflected powerful mobilisation and the democratic aspirations of youth, its aftermath placed considerable strain on the cultural sector. Across the country, heritage sites, museums, and sculptures were vandalised or damaged. In several regions, disruptions affected festivals, craft communities, and folk practitioners and disrupted the operations of many cultural institutions. Artists and creative professionals faced cancelled performances and restricted access to venues and markets. Multifaceted threats to practitioners' safety and

supports its cultural assets.

In response to the crisis period, UNESCO initiated a rapid assessment to objectively evaluate the impact of the upheaval on Bangladesh's cultural sector. The aim was not merely to document the damage and impact, but to map systemic gaps in the governance and protection of the culture sector. The rapid assessment was guided by international experts and carried out in partnership with local expert teams in three respective cultural sub-sectors: tangible heritage, intangible cultural heritage, and creative and cultural industries. The teams were mobilised through field visits, primarily in the Dhaka and Mymensingh divisions, to collect data through interviews, focus group discussions, and stakeholder consultations.

The rapid assessment found that impacts on tangible built heritage were widespread and magnified by the lack of a systemic approach. Numerous sites experienced perimeter breaches and unauthorised access by large groups, exposing weaknesses in surveillance systems, fencing, and on-site security arrangements. In several cases, deliberate acts of arson and vandalism resulted in severe structural damage, including the partial or total collapse of historic buildings and monuments. Beyond large-scale destruction, many sites suffered damage from graffiti, defacement, and surface disfigurement, compromising historical integrity and requiring specialised conservation. Looting of artefacts, photographs, and



PHOTO: UNESCO

Stakeholders at the UN House in Dhaka launch UNESCO's Action Plan to strengthen crisis preparedness and protect Bangladesh's cultural sector.

planning across the sector.

The action plan

The findings underscore a central conclusion: Bangladesh's crisis response capacity in the cultural sector is severely constrained by the lack of integrated preparedness and response systems. While the 2024 Uprising posed a significant challenge to the culture sector, the country's transition into a new era presents a unique opportunity to learn from the structural gaps the crisis exposed and to respond with concrete measures. In this regard, UNESCO followed up the rapid impact assessment report by developing a detailed action plan for the government to strengthen crisis preparedness and cultural protection and to support community recovery

artistic expressions can continue safely during periods of instability.

The action plan further underscores the need to strengthen the cultural sector's economic resilience. It recommends developing emergency support mechanisms for cultural workers, including targeted assistance for artists, artisans, performers, and creative professionals whose livelihoods are disrupted during crises. Particular attention is given to women practitioners and marginalised communities, who often face heightened vulnerability during periods of instability. The recommendations also call for investment in skills development, market recovery strategies for crafts and creative industries, and the revival of important cultural festivals and events