

The Forbidden Arts:
Family, Faith, and Cultural Capital in Muslim Middle Class Dhaka

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Economics and Social Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Social Sciences in Anthropology

Department of Economics and Social Sciences
BRAC University
June, 2025

Approval

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Declaration

I, hereby, declare that:

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing my degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where it is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degrees or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of information and help.

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Acknowledgements

I am indebted to all the people who participated in this study, taking time out of their lives from different time zones around the world to share their personal stories with me, to be vulnerable, and trust me enough to be a confidante.

I am eternally grateful to my parents, who expected the world of me even when I did not believe myself to be someone who that could be expected of. I must thank my Senjuti Apu and Dulabhai Dr. Mohammed Azam for their unconditional support, mentorship, and patronage. I must also thank Anika for ensuring that I always had someone in my corner. And I thank Dr. Ratu Rumana and Brig. Gen. ABM Siddiqur Rahman, along with the rest of my family without whom I could have not have come this far.

I owe so much to Nazia, without whom this would not have been possible, and thank all my friends from school, college and university who believed in me when I did not believe in myself. To my professors Seuty Sabur and Samia Huq, thank you for teaching me everything you did the way you did it, Shehzad M Arifeen and Muhammad Abdur Raqib for giving me a chance when I really needed one, and Shahidur Rahman for refusing to let me give up and pushing me until I finally succeeded.

Lastly, I would like to share my appreciation for doctors, nurses, ambulance drivers, and all healthcare workers who did their jobs diligently both during and after COVID. Thank you for seeing my father through the detrimental long-term consequences, thank you for seeing me through my depression and neurosis. I did not think coming this far was a possibility at all, once.

Abstract

South Asian culture is colourful, vibrant, and rich with a centuries old history of art and music, language and literature, food and festivals. The iconography for this region is distinct in its portrayal of both the mortal and the divine. But what does it look like when not taken out of context and aggrandized for an audience? The stereotypical portrayal of a young hopeful eager to take *taleem* from a *guru* in exchange for serving his household is no longer applicable. So then who is carrying on the proverbial torch and what does that look like in the 21st century? The purpose of this paper is to explore how traditional music, art, and culture are being practised today, and by whom. To that end, data has been collected first hand in the form of interviews, and then thematic analysis has been performed on the resultant information. This includes testimonies from fifteen individuals with middle-class muslim backgrounds in Dhaka, which were then dissected to observe the relationships between their participation in different cultural practices (which include performing and fine arts), and themes of faith, family, and finances. The subsequent findings highlight the mesh that is created from the interconnected strings of those relationships. The main goal here was to observe the impact of said themes as factors through a lens separate from one of stereotypical perceptions and Western ostracization, rather one of real representation and pragmatic scope instead. The final fact of the matter is that it is this grass root level participation and cultural propagation that keeps these traditions alive, and it is imperative that we study them so that preservation efforts can be maintained.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background Context

My house has always been musical. I remember waking up in the morning on weekends to the sound of old Bangla songs being played on the CD player even as a very young child. I was signed up for music classes at the age of seven and have not stopped dabbling in music ever since. Throughout my life something that has remained constant is the mini concerts that my cousins and I would put on for our aunts and uncles at every *dawat* with the entire extended family present. Our elders would slowly try to coax us out of our shy shells, scolding us if necessary. But we would always end up performing for them late into the night - that was never in doubt. From “*Bulbul pakhi moyna tiye*,” to “*Jaat gelo jaat gelo bole*,” to “*Mor priya hobe esho rani*”, and eventually songs that we wrote and composed ourselves, it is as if all the different phases of our lives had been documented in those memories and they play like a slideshow showcasing the little joys of simpler times that felt much bigger in the original moments. However, none but the youngest of my mother and her seven siblings had ever received any formal lessons in music. Growing up we got to hear numerous stories of how my eldest *Khalamoni* and *Mamas* would listen to music on their wireless under the covers, so as to not draw my Grandmother’s attention. Their subsequent persistent support and strong encouragement for us learning music was, at some points as a teenager, probably even a bit unwanted because it added so much extra pressure on top of the already existing academic pressure. But it is safe to say that the exposure we had to music had a substantial part in

influencing our lives, in spite of the fact that none of us have ever thought of pursuing music as our sole profession because our parents are all self-made people who were not raised in opulence and would never let us take the idea of financial security for granted. Though that did not stop them from introducing us to all that our rich culture had to offer.

With my overall attachment to practising cultural arts and the environment that I grew up in, back when I was little, the fact that this was not a universal experience took some getting used to. As I grew up, more and more people around me were taken out of music, art, and dance classes, because the innocence of childhood which was the remaining forgiving trait was now too gone. My extracurricular interests oftentimes had me forging more meaningful relationships with certain teachers rather than classmates, with me happily attending rehearsals for school cultural functions at the end of the academic calendar year, while the rest of my class spent their end-of-exam vacations visiting either their extended families or tourist places outside Dhaka. Still, I had almost forgotten how drastic the differences could be regarding families allowing their children to practise extracurricular activities, and only properly began to understand the entire scope of the phenomena after I started going to university, going beyond my familiar bubble. Some of my friends asked me if they could come over to my house and hold some music sessions. One friend in particular was sad after seeing that I had a new ukulele, because though he wanted to learn it himself, he could not be seen with it in his house by his parents. The difference between his situation and my own is what made me realize how polarizing individual experiences could be even within the same peer group. As opposed to my own experience, which included my father requesting all my musical friends by name to be invited over on special occasions, the situations that some of these friends found themselves in was a startling contrast, and something I was still surprised to see within my own friend circle for some reason, even if I

perhaps should not have been. This intrigue is where the topic of this paper stemmed from, and upon delving deeper into it with an anthropological mindset, how this paper eventually came to be.

In attempting to go over all of this, some concepts need to be defined in the scope of this research, like the term “religiosity” will refer to the magnitude of religious (specifically Islamic) devotion on a spectrum from atheistic to practising and devout. When referring to “cultural practices”, it will imply the performing and fine arts native to the Indian subcontinent, specifically those taught and practised in Bangladesh. This paper plans to explore the aspects of religion and religiosity, family and generational values, and economic backgrounds, when it comes to practising music and other performing and fine arts at a household level. This will be done within the context of South Asian culture, specifically in Bangladeshi society, and concentrating the scope to the urban Muslim middle class societal standards in Dhaka. Indeed, for a culture so rich in the arts, it is interesting to see how divided views can be even in a geographical area so small, as far as what is to be allowed, what is deemed permissible, and what is not. As such, the overarching theme of this paper will be observing the apparent nature and limits of these practices and the restrictions that are accordingly placed upon them. The general goal will be to observe how these practices are allowed to exist, if at all, and asking why or why not wherever applicable.

1.2 Research Questions

This thesis intends to address the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between practising different artforms and religiosity in an urban Bangladeshi context?
2. How do family and generational values influence exposure to different cultural artforms?
3. What role do family finances or economic situations play here?

1.3 Research Objectives

The research objectives for this thesis are:

1. To ascertain how inextricable the conversation around practising arts is with the conversation of practising religion;
2. To analyze the influence of family and subsequently generational values here;
3. To explore the impact of economics as a variable.

1.4 Methodology

The exploratory research conducted in this paper is in the form of an ethnography which leans heavily into being an autoethnography, on account of the nature of my already existing relationships with the interlocutors. All of them would be considered my peers and I know them or have known them personally, even if not closely, at some or some other point in life. Fifteen such individuals with an average age of 24 years have been interviewed here and provided the

data analyzed in this paper. Interlocutors were selected within my peer group with the aim that it would either reflect or negate the personal narrative I had coming into this research. Participants were interviewed in semi-structured interviews which entailed a preset questionnaire and additional questions as the situation arose or demanded. The approximately hourlong one-on-one interviews were conducted based on open-ended questions which included demographic information and overarching themes of religiosity, generational values, and individual inclination influenced by family, finances, and environment. However, as a common thread, all interviewees would be classified as coming from a middle class Muslim background, highly educated, and coming from families of either businesspeople or service holders of a certain station.

From the get go, the intention was to seek out a diverse group of people as far as possible while keeping to a certain demographic, and find out what motivated their stance and ideology as it pertains to cultural practices in the household. I ended up following through with these initial plans and it resulted in enlightening conversations with people who turned out to be much more different from each other than I had initially expected. Although efforts had been made to observe the deviation in a relatively homogenous group as much as possible, it was clear even just by the first few conversations that this would obviously fall much short of any kind of actual control group. The “keeping all other factors constant” intention I had in the beginning could also only be taken so far. It became obvious very quickly that the fifteen individuals had stories that went beyond the scope originally thought out.

The fact remains that this entire process was instigated from an anecdotal experience after which I proceeded to reflect on it and climb up the proverbial rope to find it tethered to a broader cultural rhetoric. Not only did this study allow me to make closer observations into a certain

aspect of my life, it made me explore how I fit into a bigger story arc, a greater world. As is the way with autoethnographies, the biases that we acknowledge are sorely insufficient, but we do it anyway in order to try and lessen the scope of our partiality. We also hope that those biases can be not just issues that negatively impact the study, but vantage positions from which we can provide better insight instead (Hayano, 1979).

As for the actual qualitative data, thematic analysis was done to configure it into the broader categories of Religion, Economics, and Family, and then subsequently under the more specific themes of Depth of Faith and Religiosity, Economic Capital vs Cultural Capital, and Family Conservatism and Support respectively. The Braun & Clarke (2006) method of Reflexive Thematic Analysis has been alluded to throughout the entire process, but has not been adhered to strictly, rather making way for a more narrative style approach in order to forgo the rigid coding in favour of allowing the overlap between themes to occur. This is so as to acknowledge the interconnectedness of the different contributing factors as they influence each other, and because keeping them in isolation would lower the resolution of the bigger picture. After reaching the conclusion that some sort of true control group is not within the scope of this particular research, it is imperative that the visibility of each factor affecting the other be taken advantage of.

1.5 Significance of the Research

Reviewing recent relevant literature on the impact of musical and other extracurricular training in early life leads to the conclusion that it has positive influences in cognitive development, as well as the social and emotional wellbeing of a person (Miendlarzewska & Trost, 2014). Besides positive bearings on cognitive function and brain plasticity, there is the matter of cultural

significance in these activities: they act as an agent of heritage and cultural exchange (Inawat, 2015). But this paper analyzes data that says after childhood, other factors such as family and religion come into play. This makes way for further research and other angles through which we should consider the training and education of different arts, and how they come to be embraced, or not, by different societies.

1.6 Organization of the Thesis

This paper discusses the practice of arts by individuals and how being practised at a household level had or had not impacted it. The study entails the following structure: Chapter 1 introduces the entire scope of the research, first providing a background and then going on to underline the aims and objectives of this paper, after which the methodology and significance provides further foundational material. Chapter two outlines a review of existing relevant literature, and explains the gap under a theoretical framework so as to emphasize the contribution of this study. Chapter 3 consists of all the findings of this study, the discussion and analysis of which are what Chapter 4 is based upon. This chapter goes into detail and looks at the data through different individual lenses that colour the gap in the literature. And finally, Chapter 5 concludes it all.

Chapter 2

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

2.1 The Literature

Pierre Bourdieu (1986) talks about different forms of capital - economic, social, and cultural - and how they each have different returns on investment. One of these forms of capital he establishes, and the category that the various arts in this paper fall under, is cultural capital. The knowledge about them that has symbolic value may be considered as being in an objectified state, the learning from institutions as in an institutionalized state, and the end result, having these practices ingrained or indoctrinated in them, becomes an embodied state. Bourdieu goes on to say how, as is with economic capital, cultural capital also provides access to certain echelons by being passed down through family and other social connections. The propagation of cultural capital through family members is imperative to understand, as here we talk about how it impacts the lived experiences of said family members. In a study by An & Western (2019) social capital, when measured not just in terms of family structure but also their broader social subgroup situation, has a mentionable impact on the cultural capital acquired by the children. They found that two-parent households with neighbourhood cohesion presented a higher likelihood of a child participating in extracurricular activities. The participation and appreciation of different kinds of arts shared by family work as a method of communication and forged cohesion tool. Parental transference ensures the continuation of this kind of cultural capital passing down through family members (Reeves, 2015).

Notably, higher rates of children's participation correlate with a higher household income and a

higher level of their parents' education. However, therein lies a contradiction here because it also requires a higher level of involvement from the parents in their child's engagement but this would require an investment of time that working parents might not be able to afford (Barnett 2008). On the other hand, Hjalmarsson (2023) suggests that there may be a weak association when it comes to income gradients and participation in extracurricular activities of Swedish households. The author finds that though economic constraints may have an impact in lower income family adolescents, that is not the case after a certain point. Also, said impact is higher when it comes to dropping out of those activities as opposed to taking them up. Thus his paper might draw the conclusion that Sweden has been "largely successful" when it comes to removing economic barriers that hinder participation. In another Swedish paper by Sjodin & Roman (2018) that takes a parenting-style-based approach to the issue, it says that it might as well be taken for granted that Swedish children will participate in some sort of extracurricular activities given the education levels of both the parents (especially the mother) and teachers. Put simply, children with a middle-class background are more likely to participate than their working class counterparts (Lareau, 2011).

According to Richard Shusterman (2008, p. 7), the arts being inseparable from culture and culture being inseparable from religion means we can draw up a working hypothesis that art and religion are also inextricably linked to each other. For example, regarding the lawfulness of music in Islam, Amnon Shiloah (1997) details how mystic leaders, sufi scholars, and theologians all have their own definitions of what counts as music, and it is often contradictory. There are things that may not have been deemed as music by scripture, but if someone wished to categorize Islami notions like *azaan* or *tilawaat* as music then some arguments definitely hold merit. The paper titled 'Music and Islam' by Otterbeck & Ackfeldt (2012) tackles this topic and puts forth

instances of how different hadiths had different conflicting interpretations regarding how the prophet Muhammed viewed musical interests.

Obviously, the reason for this conflict of calling something music versus not is, of course, maintaining piety; and one need only glance twice to see the parallel conflict between what is considered Islam versus what is not. Samia Huq (2011) writes about how the “removal of music is critically looked upon by secular Bengali Muslims” and how it represents Bengali cultural pride and nationalism. And, slightly different but still relevant, Rafiuddin Ahmed (1981) touches on this dichotomous idea in his book ‘The Bengal Muslim’, the idea here being that preference for indulging in cultural practices boils down to how it is to be considered for the piety of the “Bengali Muslim” individual. Inherently a contradictory label due to the supposed mutual exclusivity of the two mentioned identities, it essentially entails that the more Bengali one becomes, the less Muslim one becomes in turn. Despite the religious aspect being more so the result of external influences from the Middle East during the period after the Partition of India, and the Bengali identity predating the South Asian Muslim one, people to this day try harder to preserve the latter identity over the former. The fear that the Bengali identity will encroach upon the Muslim one, that it will dilute piety and thus practices that represent Bengaliness should be discouraged, is a fascinating observation. Because if one could so easily take away from the other, the gradual and solid Islamization of South Asia, and the syncretistic propagation of this foreign religion could not have managed to establish such a stronghold (Mahmud, 2023).

However, one must remember that the radical acceptance and embracing of Islam was an act of rebellion against the Hindu caste system to a certain extent, and so for generations, the sociocultural consciousness of a class who had to fight for their position in the hierarchy has embedded itself into their history, and their culture has manifested into a built-in wariness when

it comes to extravagant displays of cultural identity. As Dr. Huq puts it, it is how these ideals continue to exist in the face of adversity that allows for the empowerment of people as well. In being less tolerant and choosing to shun music, some find solace and strength in their own agency and religiosity. In her work 'Piety, music and gender transformation: Reconfiguring women as culture bearing markers of modernity and nationalism in Bangladesh', she produces testimonies of women specifically, in many cases the matriarch of a family, and they tell their stories of how they manage to incorporate their stances in favour of making their way through the system. The challenge that this framework presented was whether this theory would extend outside the boundaries of just traditionally considered submissive individuals, or if these ideals of tolerance would be structured according to social standing.

2.2 The Gap

A Weininger et al (2015) study concludes that quantitative analysis of secondary data is not enough to draw end-all be-all conclusions. Additionally, Lynn Barnett's 2008 study rounded off on the note that it would benefit from further research done by categorizing the different activities into clusters with more uniquely defined criteria. The gap in the literature is in the fact that the phenomenon of practicing arts at a household level has only been addressed in a Western context, and those which address Bangladeshi culture do not talk about it as the institutionalized cultural capital aforementioned by Bourdieu. Also, the very Swedish, very Western context of these previous studies fails to take into account the nuances of South Asian culture and how our culture converses with religion and society. Thus it is not just purely family dynamics that have to be observed here, it is what influences them as well.

Looking at this topic from another angle, South Asian cultural studies bring up a lot of conversation around how enriched our cultural practices are, but rarely do they address the nuances of how they are scattered among the lives of average everyday people. Our focus tends to be on the professionals or the devotees, rarely a school going boy whose knack for art was not allowed to be translated into a degree in engineering. The focus in this paper being on the culture that potentially was *not* practiced is where it invites new discourse regarding the choices and sacrifices that have reconfigured priorities - and even aspects of broader identities. The days when things such as *guru dakshina* had significance are now past, and it is imperative that we meet modern culture where it is at if we are to preserve tradition. As long as culture is practised by humans, it will mold itself to the vessel bearing it at the time, and so it will flow and change. Attempting to control the change might be futile, but documenting it might at least succeed in helping us understand in which direction it intends to flow next.

Chapter 3

FINDINGS

Here I shall present the summary of my findings from all the cases studied, the interviews that were conducted, and the stories of the people that they chose to tell about themselves. All names used here are pseudonyms in order to respect the privacy and protect the identity of the interlocutors.

i. Abir

Abir is a 22-year-old male who studies Computer Science and Engineering. When asked, he said he identified as being conservative, but not so much as his family. He comes from a very religious household who do not support his wishes to lightly pursue some music. His wishes to dabble in music stemmed from the circles he was surrounded by in school and the peer culture around him - influences from outside the family. He confessed that he did enjoy music and wanted to learn it somewhat even if not very seriously, but could not go against his family environment and father's words. As such, and as of yet, his wishes of pursuing music do not have much possibility of coming to fruition.

ii. Tanvir

Tanvir, 24, is currently pursuing a double major in Computer Science and Electrical and Electronic Engineering. He comes from a musical family. His mother is still active in her participation in music and singing. Tanvir himself does not sing, but he does play five different

instruments. However, this is only a hobby for him and a means of unwinding; he does not wish to pursue any of it as a profession, though he claims that it is because of his own interest in seriously pursuing engineering and not because it would not be accepted by his family if he wanted to. There are some generational differences though in the nature and genre of music preferences between his family and himself, with him being more interested in Western styles of music than the rest of his family.

iii. Muntasir

Muntasir is 23 years of age and currently studying Civil Engineering. Tolerance for music is almost non-existent in his household, with him coming from a conservative Muslim family. However, Muntasir himself does not identify as being very conservative at all. In fact, when he expressed his love for music and amateur singing, he confessed that he had gone to many of his friends' houses who did practice music and had more tolerant houses for informal lessons from time to time. He said, "My family is very orthodox. My mother even wears the *niqab*. Practising music is not even something I dare raise as a conversation starter at the dinner table." The magnitude of generational difference in mindset here seems noteworthy.

iv. Nafisa

Nafisa is a 23-year-old student of Architecture. Artistically inclined ever since childhood, she always knew she would be doing something that would try to put her talents to use. She also likes to sing occasionally, but her household did not always believe they would eventually allow her to pursue either her career choice or her wishes to sing. It was only when she was in class 11 and 12 that her parents realized she had her own thoughts about what she wanted to do with her life that she really wanted to follow through with. Nafisa is really enjoying her undergrad

experience, as she says she is becoming her own person and doing what she likes to do. She even performed on a stage for the first time in her second year. Basically, even though her traditional Muslim family did not support their daughter's wishes initially, they did eventually grow into it. However, she added that her older brother had a much easier path, one of less resistance, when it came to pursuing the things he wanted to do in life.

v. Tanjum

Tanjum is 22-years-old and is currently studying Economics. She comes from a very religious and devout Muslim family. She came back from *Hajj* (pilgrimage) with her family when she was only 9. When asked about her family she said it was so traditional that it fit not only the good but also some of the less favourable stereotypes when it came to very religious families. Very much male-dominated and patriarchal, she expressed dissatisfaction at many aspects of her family and upbringing, and even her current life. However, when asked about her individual inclination for music, she said she did not have any, and it was out of her own drive for religiosity, uninfluenced by other external factors. She maintained throughout the conversation that it was her own choice and that her family background did not have much to do with it.

vi. Zarin

Zarin is 21 years of age and is studying for a BBA degree in a public university. When she was quite young, she started music lessons and enjoyed them too, until she thought that she was not good enough and decided to not go any more. As she progressed into her teens, she had a growing desire to learn the guitar, but faced resistance from her parents. The sentiment behind all of this was something along the lines of, this kind of behaviour was fine when she was a child,

but no more acceptable as she was now somewhat grown up. So this is when her older sister stepped up and decided to buy a guitar for her. Her older sister decided that just because she was not allowed to do the things she had wanted, did not mean it had to be that way for Zarin as well. After continuing on to university where she gained a considerably higher amount of independence, Zarin was much more comfortable in asserting her own agency.

vii. Ishmam

Ishmam is a medical student in his mid 20s. Despite being an avid listener of diverse genres of music throughout his life, he has never had any interest in learning or practicing any art from himself. The fact that his family is quite conservative possibly had an indirect impact on that though, he maintains. His non-academic interests lean more towards sports than the arts. He views pursuing music or art as a hobby as a nice skill to have, humorously adding that it also helps to impress girls. As a profession, despite he himself starting a career in medicine - a notoriously laborious path, he claims that pursuing arts as a profession would be extremely difficult. He says one has to be very willing and brave, or very gifted and lucky, and incredibly patient if one desires the fame and glamour that comes with having it as a profession.

viii. Rahat

Rahat is a 26 year old computer science student who plays the guitar and sings. Initially, he at first could not play much by himself, so his parents saw to it that he was enrolled in guitar learning classes. However, he decided it wasn't a good fit for him and went on to become a self-taught player. He says he greatly appreciated the fact that his parents would support him so sincerely regarding something like this. However, he claims to view his abilities to be a neutral presence in life as he knows he will not pursue it professionally. He regards it as a low-stakes

way to unwind and have fun, just for himself. He does not really practice his religion much, and his family supports him in his endeavours. In fact, it was a family member that gifted him his guitar in the first place. However, he recognizes that it would be a very different story if he had wished to pursue this as a career option professionally. Also, he mentions that while growing up, his elder sister was not afforded the same level of support despite getting better grades. He admits that in a typical household in our society, people will almost exclusively follow up on their artistic inclinations if they grow up in an environment where they are actively pushed and encouraged.

ix. Keya

Keya is a graduate student whose academic field is infectious diseases and public health. She was greatly influenced by the pandemic when it came to choosing her post graduation track and saw first hand the impact of vaccines and public awareness during times of crisis. When she is not in her laboratory, she likes to paint and do art. She uses acrylic and ink as mediums, does origami, even makes things out of wires. She does not consider herself an artist, however, since she does it for herself as an amateur. She also performed on stage and sang at one point in her life, but says other things are of more interest to her. She maintains that she knows how to appreciate good art, music, and film, and likes that about herself. All this helps her ground herself, she says. She did want to do her higher education in art, but her family refused to, because “*chhobi anka te bhaat nai*” and *bhaat* is the more important thing here. Neither she nor her family, however, are bound by religion when it comes to limiting their art practice. According to Keya, she “(is) Muslim, but not Muslim enough to follow the restrictions”.

x. Sani

Sani is the youngest child in his family's lineup with three older sisters. He studies machine learning and computer simulations at a university in Japan. Singing and sketching are among his non-academic interests. He still performs at times as they are things that bring him joy, despite not having any formal training for any of them. While in Japan, music and art that he grew up on feels like a connection to home for him. However, that is as far as his practicing goes. He knows it won't be desired as a career option for him as he is from a traditional Muslim family. Not that it is ever heavily discussed, but there is a general understanding that it would be frowned upon. He says his mother went as far as to sing on the radio and television, but could not continue due to societal implications of this being a less respectable career. Moderately religious, Sani initially restricted his own interest in arts when he was younger because he felt that it would have positive bearings on his piety. But that started to slowly dwindle at around the time he was 12 years old as he started to grow into teenage and young adulthood, and began forming his own individual opinions. However, when it comes to casual enjoyment of music, his whole family takes part.

xi. Maisha

Maisha is a 25 year old postgraduate student who likes to paint, sing, and sometimes act, when she is not studying Anthropology. But hobbies like that are getting put on a backburner as she grows older. In fact, the chaos of adulthood has made it so that she no longer is able to paint as much as she would like. Trained at Shanta-Marium, she wishes that painting had a bigger, more realistic impact on life than it does in reality. A practicing Muslim, Maisha comes from a spiritual family who still support her hobbies - but only as a hobby, and throughout childhood, only after her studying was taken care of. Prioritizing maths and science was more important. But there were certain caveats, for example, she had been discouraged to draw human faces for

religious reasons. Another thing she actively did not appreciate was when she would be expected to perform for family members at gatherings upon their request. She says it no longer felt like it was for her at those times, like her parents and relatives who might now have had the chance to practice these things growing up were living vicariously through her. And as an aspiring anthropologist herself, she feels curious about there being an unspoken understanding about how piety and cultural practices are almost completely mutually exclusive, but they still manage to co-exist at a small family level.

xii. Urmi

Urmi is interested in geopolitics and state repression, but also painting, photography, and gardening. Something else this 27 year old does is poetry recitation. However, she says that she barely gets the chance to do so these days. However, she also says how skill development when it comes to arts is very difficult after a certain age, and there is not enough time in a day. She refers to artists like Armeen Musa, saying that they have a rich family history when it comes to music and therefore it makes much more sense for people like them to take it more seriously. For the average middle class person, however, it is a very brave choice at best, and not even feasible at worst. The huge leap of faith that is required is something the typical person cannot afford. Although she left her faith years ago, Urmi, who grew up as a Shia Muslim, still appreciates religious art and calligraphy. While speaking she immediately described to me a specific persian painting with depicts two leaning women with untamed hair. The fact that she no longer practices her faith is a point of contempt at home, as there develops a misalignment of opinion about her sense of fashion. She emphasizes that the root cause of all this strife is religiosity.

xiii. Rafi

Rafi is a 27 year old business analyst at a private company. He also takes a keen interest into music, playing several instruments as well as singing, and frequently moonlights as a stand-up comedian. Although the comedy has been a comparatively recent development, he has been involved in music since he was very young. He has stuck to it for so long because he says it provides him with not just recreation but it is also “about self expression to the point where it is now part of his identity”. He had two *ustaaads* come over to his house to tutor him in singing when he was younger, and later took up the guitar, keyboard, and cajon. He admits to appreciating other fine arts, even sees comedy as an art, and indulges in them at the end of a day. The day could be good or bad, it does not matter, any art contributes to his mental well being and peace of mind. However, an interesting thing came up in our conversation that was unique to this particular interview. When asked about his opinion about arts as a hobby versus as a profession, he confessed that had he sincerely wanted to pursue music as his profession, he would have had his family’s support. In fact, he says his family previously told him that might be something he would excel in. But he himself chose corporate life, because he knows how hard it is to make music a sustainable career. He adds, however, that with social media and YouTube, and music production being so accessible nowadays, younger people might be finding it a more feasible career option.

xiv. Tasnim

Tasnim is just shy of 19. She will start preparing for getting admission into a medical college after her Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) exams are over. A student of the English version curriculum, she is very familiar with and greatly resents the execution of academics in the

country. What she also resents is being raised to learn Rabindra Sangeet and classical music, only for it to be a party trick meant to make her parents look accomplished on demand in front of a crowd. She took lessons at the country's most prestigious institutions, Bulbul Academy of Fine Arts (BAFA) and Chhayanaaut, only to be told to put her musical interests on the sidelines and focus on a career in medicine.

xv. Raisa

Raisa is a 27 year old research student who enjoys indulging in her creative writing on the side. When she was young, she had shown interest in music, getting excited when her cousin next door agreed to teach her. They were 8 and 10 years old at the time, and once the frequent afternoon meetup patterns were noticed by their guardians, the “lessons” immediately halted. Nothing was worth spending extra time over other than academics, after all. Raisa says that she remembers the reactionary outburst of her mother after that event even after all these years, but has since mellowed with age. Her writing, however, has yet to be disturbed. She credits her poetry with keeping her sane and not overflowing with all her emotions from day to day life. Growing up in an environment where academic achievements were the only ones highlighted, creative and extra-curriculars a throwaway comment at best, she treasures her writing alter ego and knows well where to talk about it and where to not. Despite identifying as Muslim, she does not heavily practice her religion and notes that any restrictions imposed in her household about extracurriculars in the name of religion was more so because of culture instead. Lastly, she notes that whenever we talk about poetry, we usually refer to recitation of already established poems written by the greats. She adds that even in cultural spheres, writing poetry is looked upon differently in comparison to reading or reciting it. Raisa says she had already internalized a lot of these biases by the time she realized how impactful they were, and remarks that had she never

been exposed to them, her poetry might have been different to what it is today, but we will never know.

Sl. no.	Respondent's name	Age	Occupation	Religious? *	Family supports the arts?	Interested in the arts?	Engaged in the arts?
1.	Abir	22	CSE student	Yes	No	Yes	No
2.	Tanvir	24	CSE & EEE student	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
3.	Muntasir	23	Civil engineering student	No	No	Yes	No
4.	Nafisa	23	Architecture student	No	No	Yes	Yes
5.	Tanjum	22	Economics student	Yes	No	No	No
6.	Zarin	21	BBA student	No	No	Yes	Yes
7.	Ishmam	Early 20s	Medical student	Yes	No	No	No

8.	Rahat	26	CSc student	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
9.	Keya	Mid 20s	Graduate student	No	No	Yes	Yes
10.	Sani	Mid 20s	Graduate student	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
11.	Maisha	25	Graduate student	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
12.	Urmi	27	Researcher	No	No	Yes	No
13.	Rafi	27	Business analyst	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
14.	Tasnim	19	HSC student	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
15.	Raisa	27	Research student	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

Table 3.16 [*Those who answered above a 5 to question 12 of the set questionnaire were considered as religious]

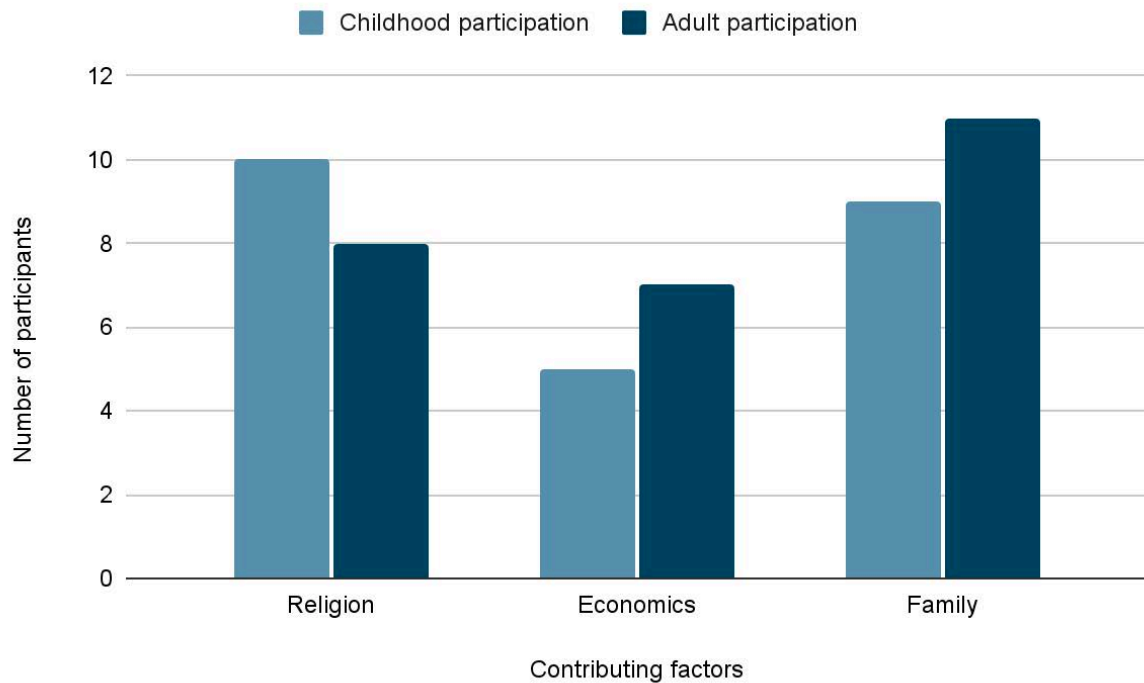


Table 3.17

What we can observe in Table 3.16 is the pattern in the relation between each individual's childhood indoctrination and their participation in extracurriculars beyond childhood. Family values, finances, and religious stances do not have significant bearings in deciding whether or not individuals were exposed to them in childhood, but almost exclusively they all shaped where those interests would be either chased after or laid to rest going into adulthood. Most importantly, however, those who quantified their religiosity as higher than 5 were mostly consistent with their preferences of participation, while those who did not identify as religious harboured more mixed feelings.

In the next chart Table 3.17, we can see the impact of individual upbringing upon carrying extracurricular interests through to adulthood. We can ascertain from the visual that both economic and familial restraints once left behind allowed more individuals to explore more than

they previously could. However, in cases where religiosity and faith were more detrimental to cultural practices, there is more consistency through the transition to adulthood. And while life phases or time are not variables in this particular research, it can be used as a metric of how deep or shallow the themes can have an impact in lived experiences.

Chapter 4

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Here we shall refer back to the original research questions and address them with information provided by the participants while answering the questionnaire. The analysis has been done by organizing the qualitative data according to the underlying contributing theme which informs the corresponding research objective in turn. The broad themes have been labelled as religion, economics, and family.

4.1 Depth of Faith and Religiosity

Attempting to answer the first research question regarding the relationship between art practice and religiosity, we shall highlight a few questions like take a closer look at questions 12 and 17 off the questionnaire and analyze how they were answered. When asked to quantify their religiosity on a scale of 1 through 10 where 1 is non-believing and 10 is practising and devout, participants who said a lower number were the ones who held more resentment towards their family and/or society for not encouraging these interests as a child. I also asked if their family's stance aligned with theirs, and if that stance was contingent upon their religious beliefs, and participants explained how even when the catalyst was culture, it was chalked up to religious restrictions instead. The aspect of tolerance here is important because a lack of it tends to establish a dichotomy between religious and cultural practices, each being considered mutually exclusive from each other by most. Looking into the case studies further, we find that individuals like Muntasir found solace outside socio-religious restrictions, while Abir found it more

comfortable to conform to the “rules” instead. Both wished to participate or practice some kind of artform at one point, but went about it two different ways. Sani went through a journey when it came to his own perceived piety. His current position, while much more liberal than it used to be, still had self-imposed limits. He does, however, continue his participation in a non-formal manner. Next, Urmi’s strained relationship with her religiosity is a reason for contempt in her household. But that doesn’t stop her from embracing religious art and music. Rather than an either/or thing, she views art to often be an expression of one’s religiosity - which she shows while admiring the work of Muslim artists and calligraphers. Urmi breaks the binary here with a position that occupies shades of grey on the spectrum rather than the clear cut black and white of religion versus art. If we here now take into account Dr. Huq’s arguments about being empowered within the existing system by dint of abstaining from music, the example that would fit perfectly here is the case of Tanjum. For her, it was a completely voluntary choice to shun music and other artforms, based on both her beliefs and interests. Ishmam shares the same views, but admits that his family and upbringing probably influenced his interest, or rather lack thereof, subconsciously. These last examples beg us to observe if this is actually reminiscent of a polarized dichotomy of religion vs culture. In Rafiuddin’s ‘The Bengal Muslims’ (1981) we come to know that the historical chronology bears witness to the possible origins of this rhetoric. When it came to cultural practices as a stand in for Bengali nationalism, the question then became that of identity, to be either a Bengali or a Muslim. The two were no longer allowed to mutually co-exist. To indulge in one was to refute the identity of the other. So the fact that so many of these interlocutors’ testimonies include a similar sentiment is not altogether unexpected.

4.2 Economic Capital vs Cultural Capital

The research question that shall be addressed here pertains to how artistic prospects are influenced by family finances and economics. Social class is also a variable being considered as it is directly proportional to family finances and economics. The desire for upward social mobility means a desire to seek out financial stability - which is not often consistent with taking up an artistic or creative profession. For question 10, participants were asked about their opinion of such careers, of arts as a hobby vs as a profession. Almost all the answers were along the lines of something that said it would not be a pragmatic route to follow. And this is not a novel idea by any stretch of the imagination; this has been a survival skill for as long as there has been a system with exchange values for goods and services, although, one might think the situation had improved by now. One might go so far as to say that people want to participate in the arts, it is the economic and societal consequences that won't let them. Because, obviously, securing regular sustenance is the top priority. Returning back to the case studies, Keya, despite expressing an aspiration of pursuing higher education in arts, was heavily discouraged by her parents to say the least. Being an only child - and a daughter at that - means all the more pressure had been put on her. Because if a career does not guarantee success or security, then there is no point in pursuing it. Another interlocutor, Tasnim, was pushed towards extracurricular achievements her entire life and yet she would never be allowed to prioritize it over ambitions of becoming a doctor - one of the most highly paid professions with pretty much guaranteed job security. Ishmam, a doctor in training with minimal artistic inclinations, opines that a career in arts would be more difficult than a career in medicine, because unlike being a physician, there are no guarantees of becoming an actually successful musician. Raisa was outright forbidden to get derailed from a solid academic career in favour of her artistic inclinations, because what

parent would not want their child to have a financial safety net for the remainder of their lives. The lone exception here is Rafi, as he knows his parents would support him if he chose to follow a dream down that path, but he himself is averse to taking that risk. The risk of financial uncertainty is not one he is willing to take. And thus cultural capital makes way for economic capital to remain at the top of the list of priorities.

4.3 Family Conservatism and Support

When looking at family as a contributing factor for participation in different arts, we first look at the lines of consistency drawn between the role of family and the actual participation of each individual. When asked if their family impacted their decision to or to not participate on the questionnaire, instead of a simple yes/no, I received a myriad of stories about how there was an unspoken understanding that these things were not to be talked about, or about how these were simply child's play, to be grown out of as one got older. The family's approach about exposing them to said arts directly correlated to the individuals themselves practising, and 10 out of the 15 fell in line with their parents' expectations. Of the 6 whose parents gave them intentional exposure from early childhood, all 6 carried their interests and practices through to adulthood. Rafi, Rahat, and Tanvir received active support from their families, and they now cherish their talents that had been allowed to grow under care. Nafisa and Zarin, despite going against the grain and their family's wishes, found an outlet that helps them find peace, socialize and connect with new people, and talk about as an interest - all while finding their own footing while transitioning into adulthood. The thing is, family plays such an important role not just in providing exposure of the art, but in creating the artist. The exposure that is necessary to instill in

them the concept that this is an option, a possibility. But arguably even more important is to instill the thirst for more. Rafi, Rahat, and Tanvir all have supportive families and their participation is harmonious. Nafisa and Zarin did not receive support initially, but their families warmed up to the idea of them participating, or at least they were neutral enough to let them explore as much as they wanted. Maisha and Sani know it is personal for them and not institutional, but they know how much encouragement they will get and where their limits are when it comes to pursuing it further. Basically, family is an integrated variable. Both religiosity and economic conditions inform family as a contributing factor when it comes to arts. As Bourdieu (1986) wrote about cultural capital: it propagates down through family lines. Reeves (2015) said that the parents' own experiences and participation greatly impact how these practices are coloured in the eyes of their children - they turn into a mode of communication. It may not be in their blood literally, but figuratively speaking, it absolutely turns out that way.

All in all, the findings emphasize the hypothesis that there is no direct and simple "if-then" type of conditional relation between any single theme and practising culture, rather it requires an amalgamation of multiple factors layered on top of each other and overlapping that creates the final effect.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it may be argued that religiosity and aspirations of piety play a bigger role than initially what was thought. In fact, one might go so far to say that these matter more than just religion itself. We often mix up concepts and maintain that modernity has to be more liberal, but as we can see from the diverse levels of tolerance, modernity is as abstract a concept as it ever was. My takeaway from this journey was that cultural practices as a measure of Bengali pride or being “cultured” is a mere construct and that it is hard to deconstruct patterns that can correctly predict how family influences these things. Even the most strict household may be harbouring a renegade, even the most liberal family may just choose not to pursue it. At the end of it all, it is all about reveling in our diversity and cherishing the opportunities that present themselves to us. What these forbidden arts say about us is not the whole picture and can never be. These themes alone are terribly insufficient to construct entire identities even though that is a herculean task often misattributed to the matter.

Further thematic analysis may be able to succeed in ascertaining how to ensure the propagation of cultural practices, because it is imperative that it be logged and documented for future forensic endeavours, and the fusion of factors contributing to carry on traditions can be preserved. The aim of this paper was not to force labels of morality upon traditional norms, but instead to address the concept of overarching themes all being variables that influence each other in their role perpetuating culture. The harbinger of progress does not lie in the unwilling imposition of norms, but rather the organic encouragement of it. Not in the intentions to promote it beyond

reproach, but rather learning the nuances of its propagation and allowing there to be conversation addressing lines blurred between identities and the existence of shared stories that have been important throughout the length of human history.

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Appendix

Questionnaire:

1. Please provide the following personal details:
 - Name
 - Age
 - Gender identity
 - Occupation/ Institution
2. What are some of your academic interests?
3. What are some of your non-academic interests?
4. Have you at any point in your life been involved in music or any other performing or fine arts? If yes, please answer questions 5-7, then proceed to question 10. If no, skip those and answer question 8 and onwards.
5. Do you continue to participate in your preferred art form today? Why or why not?
6. Have you ever been formally taught or taken any classes in your preferred art form? If yes, when and for how long?

7. What does your preferred art form mean to you now at this point in your life? Does it provide any value addition? Does it pose a hindrance to your normal daily life? Or does it have neutral bearings on your current lifestyle?
8. Have you ever wanted to participate in any art form?
9. How would you view all these artforms and the people who practice them? Would you regard them with a positive, negative, or neutral mindset?
10. What is your perspective about pursuing any art form as a hobby versus as a profession?
11. Do you identify as a member of any religion? If yes, which one?
12. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you quantify your religiosity, with 1 being non-believing and 10 being practising and devout?
13. Have your religious views had any bearing on whether you do/do not participate in any arts?
14. Has your family impacted your decision to/to not participate?
15. Does your inclination align with your family's approval or lack thereof?

16. In case of misalignment, has it successfully impacted your actuality, or have you shown disregard for it and carried on anyway?
17. Would you say your family's approval or lack thereof regarding this is related to any religious views?
18. Do the standards for approval vary among different members of the family?
19. If yes, do they vary on the basis of age, gender, academic results, or any combination of these?
20. Please add some of your final thoughts about practising an art form as someone in your position and standing in society, especially if you have any specific observations of your own from your surroundings.

Thank you for your time.