**`Where art thou?`**

BY M U N A K H A N 2020-12-27

WHAT has Covid not ravaged? Yet throughout the grim period, people found some succour in arts and culture.

Some memorable scenes during the first lockdowns included neighbourhoods playing sing-alongs on their balconies in places, opera singers performing outdoors in their neighbourhoods, musicians collaborating on virtual ensembles and who can forget the parody videos that came out like Corona Rhapsody. But according to a Unesco report in May, `despite the crucial role played by culture in times of isolation and resiliency, economic indicators predict that the cultural sector will be one of the most affected by, and probably one of the latest to recover from the pandemic and its consequences`.

Also, according to Unesco, about 90 per cent of museums shut during lockdown worldwide and they expected one in eight museums to shut permanently. Another 13pc said they didn`t know if they could continue.

Then there`s the impact Covid had on cultural tourism. According to a World Bank report in August 2020, the World Heritage Sites of Elmina Castle and Cape Coast Castle in Ghana, which were thriving pre-Covid, were hard hit. The attractions along with the near 60 hotels shut down and some 1,500 jobs were lost.

Several governments allocated funds during lockdowns to support the arts: the Australians created a Restart Investment to Sustain and Expand Fund of A$75 million (US$57m) to encourage applicants to reimagine delivery of arts to communities nationwide. The UK announced a £1.57 billion fund in July to protect British cultural and arts heritage institutions. The US Congress appropriated $75m to the National Endowment for the Arts through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security package to help support organisations impacted by Covid. And then there`s scores of private individuals, donors who assisted artists, collectives, museums etc.

We have seen art prosper during political and economic uncertainty; artists have survived persecution in Mao`s China or Hitler`s Germany so there`s no question of its demise -what shape it takes is another question. As happened in the 2008 economic crisis, Covid has impacted three sources of revenue for the arts: government funding, private donations, and income generated by sales and ticketing.

Much has changed since that economic crisis, the most notable being the donors` mindset.

In her article in Art News early this month, director of the Arts Funders Forum Michelle Wolfwroteaboutanewgenerationof funders who `prioritise advancing social, racial, environmental justice and equity; they seekspecific, measurable impact; and they embrace technology to solve the pressing issues of our day`. This reflects a failure of the arts community in explaining its relevance, and unless drastic actions are taken to reinsert its importance in the public discourse, arts will suffer a worse blow.

The debate on whether the government should support the arts is an old one but in Pakistan, it`s not a discussion that comes up often. I believe it`s because art is seen through either the purview of the elite, or morality ie fahashi. This latter discourse dominates the debate which can be seen in how funds are given to the arts.

In 2019-2020, the budget allocated Rs96.100m to new schemes related to arts and culture up by a whopping Rs100m from the previous year. However, it allocated Rs300m to the Information and Culture Department making its priorities clear. No one in Pakistan thinks the arts can yield dividends.

At the moment, there is a slow movement of arts erasure in Pakistan. Authorities shut down a concert in Karachi on grounds they`dviolated SOPs but political rallies, religious gatherings, even weddings continue with no attempts to monitor any adherence to maintenance of SOPs. The priorities are clear.

Moving forward,the current government needs to recognise the cultural and creative sectors from an economic lens. An Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development report noted how investment in the arts can create jobs, spur innovation and contribute to channels for social impact ie education, urban regeneration and mental well-being. The government can also consider tax incentives for businesses that support the arts, especially in rural areas where creative outlets can help build community. All the research shows the arts sector can create jobs, stimulate business and create tax revenues.

The arts also make public spaces livable and attractive. We`ve seen this with the biennales in Karachi and Lahore where the cities became living, breathing galleries for people to peruse at their leisure. The exposure to art gives people an opportunity to engage with ideas they may not have encountered otherwise. They build social cohesion and resilience.

Please try and help amplify this message to those in power so they can enter 2021 with a new approach to the arts. The writer teaches journalism at IBA in Karachi.