The Day the Music Died*
(روزی کہ موسیقی مرد)

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December 13, 2023

Figure 1: A shot from the song "Darya" (River) by Misbah.

In 1977, Pakistan bore witness to Zia Ul Haq, a military general, orchestrating a coup and seizing control of the country. Zia, driven by the belief that foreign influences had eroded the core values and cultural fabric of the country, committed himself to enforcing Nezam-e-Mustafa (the order of the prophet) in a bid to align the country with the culture and religious identity of the Arabian Peninsula. A parallel discourse appears to be surfacing in contemporary America, as concerns mount over the perceived threat to American culture and values from immigrant-brought foreign influences (brookings.edu). Strikingly reminiscent of Pakistan's history, these concerns underscore a larger question: Could the United States embark on a similar path of realigning with its perceived cultural roots? The answer, perhaps, only time can reveal.

*I am continually researching history to form a clearer picture of past events. Unfortunately, due to extensive censorship and manipulation of historical records, this is not an easy endeavor. Moreover, understanding cultures, which are ever-evolving and intricately connected to global events of both the past and present, further complicates the task. Therefore, this article might be subject to change without notice as I discover new information.

Nevertheless, Pakistan's story stands as a cautionary tale – a tale of a culture butchered by those who proclaimed to be leading it towards purity.

Zia's cultural overhaul in Pakistan had far-reaching repercussions, shaking the very core of the nation's identity and leaving it grappling to rediscover its essence. This essay zeroes in on music – an integral facet of Pakistan's cultural and religious identity that bore the brunt of Zia's reforms. His Neezam-e-Mustafa wrought the closure of bars, nightclubs, and theater halls in Pakistan – stripping aspiring singers and bands of venues where they could hone their craft and earn livelihoods (PulseConnects). On TV and radio, music faced strict censorship, with the regime banning music for arbitrary reasons, such "endorsing alcohol consumption" if the lyrics mentioned the word "drink," and "obscenity" if a male and female were shown standing too close or dancing (Dawn News, Pulse Connects). This sweeping wave of cultural regulation even extended to attire. In fact, "Dil Dil Pakistan", a patriotic hymn – the only kind of music one would hope could thrive under a regime steeped in nationalist propaganda – fell victim to censorship for showing young men in western attire (Dawn News).

Pakistan sits at the crossroad of cultures, and Pakistani music was a mirror to its rich cultural heritage, combining elements of Persian, Western, Indian, and Arabian influences into a unique symphony where the timeless elegance of classical poetry harmonized with contemporary beats, the sitar's strings resonated alongside the guitar's chords, and soul-stirring melodies entwined with soft harmonies. Pakistani music effortlessly embraced its own rhythm and gracefully merged with the cadences of the cultures it embraced. The feeling can be experienced in the popular tracks of the 80's and early 90's, including Zoheb Hassan's "Jaadu" ("Magic"), Nazia Hassan's "Kya Huwa" ("What Happened?"), Shabana Benjamin's "Aye Gul-e-Yasmeen" ("O Jasmine"), Strings' "Sar Kiye Pahaar" ("Summited the Mountains"), Awaz's "Jaadu Ka Cheragh" ("Magic Lamp"), Tahira Syed's "Pal Pal Jhoomon" ("Every Moment I Dance"), and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's "Mustt Mustt". Tragically, these musical pieces echo some of the last notes of Pakistan's musical legacy before the grip of Zia's policies estranged it forever.

Zia's gravest offense against music was his promotion of Wahhabism, a puritanical form of Islam from the Arabian Peninsula that denounces, among other things, music and dance. He wove this doctrine into Pakistan's once-secular British-inherited constitution, and appointed Islamic clergy to key positions in the government and judiciary (Pakistan, a modern history - Ian Talbot). He even restructured the school history curriculum to artificially link the nation's past and its forefathers to the Arabian Peninsula. To disseminate Wahhabism, Zia's regime established state-funded madrassas (religious schools) across Pakistan, targeting marginalized youth who had few educational alternatives beyond these draconian institutions, that would often beat them into devout Muslims at the cost of their humanity (Tribune). The spread of these madrassas was heavily fueled by funding from the United States and Saudi Arabia, as they were not just preaching Wahhabism but also weaponizing it to indoctrinate young Afghan refugees and other Afghan groups to return to their homeland and fight a "holy way" against the Soviet army that had invaded their territory. However, the students of these madrassas also opened another front in their holy war, this one against music in Pakistan. They threatened many musicians into renouncing their craft or leaving the country altogether (ArabNews). Their fervor escalated to the point of burning down record shops and

launching attacks on art exhibitions and musical performances (Tribune, AlJazeera).

Despite being a cornerstone of Pakistan's cultural and religious heritage, music was casted a foreign intrusion in Pakistan's culture by Zia's puritanical Arabization drive. However, this drive for a pristine Arab identity, purged of foreign influences, resulted in an ironic twist of fate – Pakistan's culture became even more foreign. Bollywood music from neighbouring India, which at the time made heavy use of Urdu – the lingua franca of Pakistan – started to fill the void left by Zia's clampdown on local music.

Zobaan-e-Urdu-e-Moalla (The Language of the Imperial City), shortened to "Urdu", was created from the Muslim invasion of North India, when Persian, the language of the Central Asian Muslim invaders, got admixed with the vernacular of the Indians. The new empire, known today as the Mughal Empire, recognized for its opulence and grandeur, and the construction of architectural wonders such as the Taj Mahal, established Persian and its derivative Urdu as its court languages. With their prestigious status among the elite and educated, these languages became a conduit for the creation of countless literary and poetic masterpieces. After the British colonisation of Mughal India, Urdu, alongside English, assumed the mantle of official languages. This transition ushered in a new era for Urdu literature, where threads of romanticism intertwined with revolutionary fervor, voicing the evolving aspirations of that time period. Following the British withdrawal and the birth of Pakistan, Urdu and English continued to serve as the state's official languages, and Persian was taught as a second language at schools because of its heavy component in Urdu and the literature and cultural legacy of the country written in Persian. However, these languages started to phase out in the face of Zia's push for Arabic. He went so far as replacing the Persio-Urdu greeting "Khuda Hafiz" with Arabic "Allah Hafiz." The Islamic holy month "Ramzan" became "Ramadan," prayer changed from "Namaz" to "Salah," and Ablution from "Wuzu" to "Wudu" (LobeLog). In Zia's vision of Arabized Pakistan, Urdu and Persian were impurities that had no place in Pakistani culture. These languages were also a danger to Zia's regime because of the amount of centuries of literature they wove in their tapestry and their ability to give voice to the romantics and revolutionaries of the era.

Zia's promotion of Arabic wounded Urdu, and its poetic eloquence, thereby not just targeting Pakistani music but also attacking the very linguistic essence of musical expression. In India, however, a divergent story unfolded. Despite being spoken by a mere 5% of the population, Urdu's association with royalty, culture, and sophistication and it's ability to articulate the feelings of the heart lended by centuries of literary work rendered it the choice for Bollywood's romantic themes. And Bollywood music served in Urdu struck a chord with Pakistanis longing for music amid Zia's restrictions. As Pakistan's own musical compositions waned, the melodies of Bollywood took their place.

Now, about three and a half decades since Zia's regime, the grip of music-related restrictions have somewhat loosened, and the rise of internet has provided people with a new means of sharing music and circumventing censorship (though the internet itself is often a target of censorship now). Consequently, Pakistan's music scene has witnessed some resurgence, however, the new music that has emerged is markedly different from what Pakistani music used to be. As generations of Pakistanis have grown up listening to Bollywood music, a cultural shift has quietly taken root. Pakistanis have grown accustomed to the tunes and melodies of Bollywood. In response, the domestic music

scene has embraced a process of ”Bollywood-ification,” a desperate bid to stay relevant among a populace now attuned to the rhythms of Bollywood. The signature combination of Persian, Western, Indian and Arabian influences that defined Pakistani music is absent from much of the recent compositions, especially those that attain popularity among the masses. Moreover, with the rise of Hindu nationalism in India, Urdu began to be perceived as a symbol of Muslim imperial rule over India, and Bollywood faced criticism for promoting the language of the imperialists. In response, Bollywood music started adapting by incorporating more Hindi – the lingua franca of India—gradually sidelining Urdu (My name is Khan... from the epiglottis: Changing linguistic norms in Bollywood songs, Hindustan Times). Pakistani listeners of Bollywood music also adapted to the increasingly Hindi-laden lyrics of Bollywood, which has distanced them from Urdu – a language already dying because from the Arabization policies Zia enacted.

Zia’s pursuit of an illusory cultural purity set in motion a chain of events that have made the Pakistan’s culture all the more foreign. Flourishing cultures thrive not by rejecting external influences, but by seamlessly integrating them into their unique narratives. Forcing a rigid cultural identity out of some perceived sense of religious or ethnic superiority goes against the grain of natural cultural evolution. The outcome, as exemplified by Pakistan’s music culture, can destroy the culture’s very identity.