

When the Lions Find their Storytellers

Shahidul Alam

Encuentro Internacional de Medellín MDE11

“Until the lions find their storytellers, stories about hunting will always glorify the hunter.”

History is always written by the victor. Even in defeat, occupiers try and shape history to their agenda. In December 1971, my father had been invited to a tea party given by the occupying general of the Pakistani army. An invitation by the general was not something one generally declined. But the occupying army was on the defensive, and my father took the calculated risk of not going. It turned out to have been a very wise decision. No one who had gone to the party on the 14th December 1971, returned. It was only two days later, when the army had surrendered, that we discovered the killing fields in Rayerbazaar. Knowing they would have to leave, the army had decided to leave the new nation intellectually crippled. So they targeted artists, teachers, journalists and other professionals who they felt could shape the emerging nation. It was their attempt at shaping history, even though their control was transient.

My introduction to photography involved learning to see. As a teacher and a communicator, I have also had to learn how to show. Part of the process involved the ability to visualize how others see things. Working with black and white infra-red film, shooting blind through an opaque filter, I learnt to see how the film sees. Learning how people see and how cultures read things was the next step. 1971 had left an indelible stamp on all Bangladeshis, but to those who knew of Bangladesh through those months of horror and heard Kissinger describe Bangladesh as the international basket case, have failed to recognize the value of the nation, the richness of its culture or its history and heritage.

An image of a woman dying of cholera being carried by a man, photographed by the great war photographer Don McCullin, created a lasting impression upon photojournalists. However, even twenty five years later other photographers had been copying that image, regurgitating the stereotype. The absence of local storytellers, or more accurately, the suppression of local storytelling has led to the distorted perceptions becoming the only stories to be told about majority world countries.

Our photographic practice therefore has dealt with not only creating opportunities for indigenous storytellers, but also with involving the community in our photographic practice. I remember a little girl in Savar, on the outskirts of Dhaka, bringing along her pet goat to one of our shows, as there was a photo of the goat in the exhibition!

Chobi Mela, the festival that we organize, is a showcase for regional photography, but also introduces the local photographic community and the audience, to work being produced around the globe, in what has now become the world's most

demographically diverse festival. A unique feature of the festival is that exhibitions do not only take place in the most prestigious galleries in the country, but also find their way through mud tracks in country lanes on bullock carts and on convoys of boats along Bangladeshi rivers. They take the gallery to the people.

There are other aspects to our practice. While we questioned the power structures involved when white western photographers took pictures of poor slum dwellers, we were also aware that as middle class male photographers, with a camera in our hands, we ourselves were in a position of considerable power. So we tried to change things ourselves, initially through training women photographers and later by training working class children. The latter, originally intended to run over six weeks has been an ongoing initiative since 1994, and has resulted in our agency having a large proportion of professionals who are from working class backgrounds. Their take on life and the hard questions they have asked of the agency, have been a hugely educative process for us.

While poverty cannot be ignored, majority world photographers have found intelligent and sensitive portrayals of poverty, that have dwelled not so much on the lack of material things, but the commonalities that people have across class and cultural barriers. They have ensured that the dignity of the people portrayed come through. Their images show trust and understanding and a degree of access impossible for visiting photographers to gain.

What has impressed me most in my photographic career however, was a situation, during a flood, when I was taking pictures of a group of children in Gaforgaon in Mymensingh, during the devastating floods of 1988. The children wanted to be photographed. I positioned the children close to a broken wall where I was getting a gentle Northern light. I realized, only as I pressed the shutter, that the boy in the middle was blind. I wondered what it was that made it so important for the blind boy to insist on being photographed. Newspapers in Bangladesh, cater only to their stakeholders, the advertisers, the shareholders and the urban elite. The rural poor are not part of this select group and are subsequently never catered for in their reporting. The poor therefore are never featured in news items as individuals, unless they are involved in something grotesque, or if the numbers are spectacular. The blind boy by being photographed stood a chance (in his mind) of existing as an individual, of rising above anonymity. This power of the photograph, and the responsibility this places on the photographer, has had a sobering effect on me, reminding me of the trust placed on me by that blind boy.

It was as an activist trying to bring down a powerful general that I began my documentary practice. Showing work that was critical of the regime was near impossible, particularly since the work highlighted the wedding of a powerful minister's daughter that had taken place while the nation was reeling under a devastating flood. We did manage to bring the general down and in the impromptu show at the same gallery that had refused to let us exhibit earlier, we featured a hastily installed show. We had near riots containing the crowds. The queue outside the gallery was over a mile long and approximately 400,000

people came to see the show in three days. It reaffirmed to us the power of the image, and what a powerful tool it was in the process of social change. Later I photographed a woman casting her vote in the first fair and free election held in the country. For me the photograph was symbolic. The woman, through her vote was avenging the killing of Noor Hossain, a worker, who had written on his bare back "Let Democracy be Freed". Hossain had been slain by police bullets on the 10th November 1987 and has since become a symbol for our struggle for democracy.

There have been other ways in which we have tried to change the status quo through our photography. Aware that for centuries, majority world cultures had been indexed, categorized, and pigeon holed by white visiting anthropologists, social scientists and explorers, we decided to turn the table around and initiated a project to record the British Upper Class, by photographing the white tribes of Britain.

Closer to home, there were other more important phenomenon to be documented. The government had, in March 2004, introduced an elite force which was given unlimited powers. Their aim apparently was to curb corruption, but soon this elite force, called the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), turned to extra judicial killings for which it was never held accountable. All the deaths were attributed to 'Crossfire' which apparently resulted in the death of those arrested, though there was clear evidence in most cases that these were murders in custody. Protests, media reports, even attempts by the court to hold the government accountable had failed. So a new strategy needed to be developed.

At an aesthetic level, the photographs were taken using torch light (the image of torches being shone on the eyes, was a common occurrence in the case studies). The photographs were far from violent, even placid on some occasions. There were no captions, though quotes from government officials, or relevant statistics did accompany some of the images. The gallery was darkly lit. The beautifully made fine art prints, lit by spotlight. An eerie video, of torch light snaking through tall reeds and military boots trampling through had a sound track of crickets interspersed with border police conversations. The obfuscation was deliberate with the audience required to actively seek out information. The information was there, through a well-researched Google Earth map. A list of all the people killed was also available and the audience was invited to write in their own hand the name of a victim on a large canvas that was on one of the walls.

The media release had also been carefully planned. It was staggered from its release in North America five days before the show, through to it being discussed at midnight preceding the show, live on television in Dhaka. The entire event was streamed on the Net. The day of the show, a steady stream of government officials. Starting from RAB and ending up with high-level politicians as well as the police, called or made visits, saying the show must be stopped. We of course continued, and when riot police were called in to close the show, we opened in the street. I even managed to sneak back into the gallery to do a gallery walk on Skype with the secretary general of Reporters Sans Frontiers in Paris.

This was followed up with interviews of the riot police as well as an interview of the person making a death threat against me. Subsequently the foreign minister came to open a different show in our gallery, but we hung the prints on the corridors around the gallery and the foreign minister had to walk through the corridor to get to her opening! The show had a massive following, resulting in street-wide protests with the media demanding that the government re-open the show. We took the government to court and realizing they were going to lose, the government pulled back the police on the last day, giving us a symbolic victory. The show resulted in a rapid decline in 'Crossfire' deaths, though they have started rising again. We are now putting together postersets which are complete exhibitions and will be used by human rights groups in their campaigns.

This is one of the many ways in which we have used photography as a tool for activism and education. We have also actively tried to break the divisions between art forms, by ensuring an inclusive programme where artists of all descriptions, activists, teachers and other leading thinkers have come under the same platform to press for social justice.