

# Zooming in on professional photographers

In conversation with Dr Shahidul Alam

FAYZA HAQ

**D**WELLING on what made him create Drik, Dr Shahidul Alam, sitting in his gallery, recently, says, "It was largely a response to what was happening: I was at that time, representing an agency in London, and I looked at their entry requirements for extending support to photographers. I realised that there was no way a photographer, say in a country like Bangladesh, could provide that sort of material. The local photographers needed far more support than was provided by these agencies. So, the western model was inappropriate for us."

"Also, it was important for it to be based here: an agency in London didn't really meet the requirements of a photographer here. This is not only in terms of language but also accessibility; in terms of providing the physical structures and the guidance that will be needed to set up a little platform to provide that professional support. That was the idea behind setting up Drik."

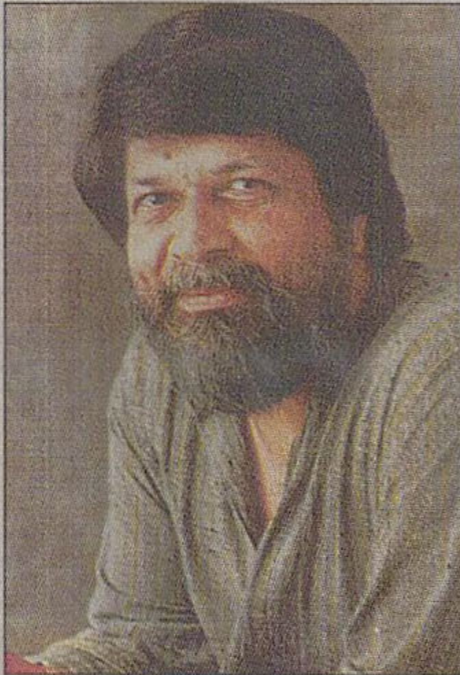
Dr Alam says, that conceptually the reason for setting up Drik, had to do with challenging the way many countries are portrayed. These countries are known for poverty such as Bangladesh, although there is so much to know about this

country.

He felt that western photographers are the only ones portraying a country like Bangladesh and they will continue to portray the same negative stereotypes. To challenge that, he says, you need local practitioners with better understanding of local conditions and a cultural sensitivity.

Pathshala, he says, came much later. The idea at that time was to conduct training. While Drik needed to be set up, he says, one had to set up a centre for academic training, which was needed, if photographers were to be given much more hands on support. They needed tutoring and mentoring, he says, and therefore there was a need to set up a full-fledged academic structure, which would provide a different type of support. Drik, he says, continues to provide support for established professionals, but Pathshala, plays a very different role, providing far more support in terms of providing educational facilities, which professionals at Drik aren't able to do.

Dr Alam says, "In Bangladesh, we lack photographers at the very top level, that for instance, India has. However, we're miles ahead of countries such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and even Singapore, Malaysia and Afghanistan."



Dr Shahidul Alam

Asked to name some of the Bangladeshi photographers, he mentioned photojournalists like Abir Abdullah, Akash, Momena Jalil. Outside photojournalism, there is Sanjida Sheikh and SA Kiron; considering the much more senior photographers, there is Rashid Talukdar. Dr Alam says, "I believe that the younger photographers have far more potential, as they have had the classical training and their fundamentals are far more solid in their case."

The younger generation have all been trained at Pathshala and the teachers, at one time, were all a visiting faculty comprising of overseas tutors, who were the finest professionals, Dr Alam says. Some said that the quality of education in this line was far superior to that of overseas. Over the years, there are a lot of foreign tutors coming to Pathshala.

Dr Alam's family -- in the late '70s when he was doing his Ph.D in Chemistry in UK -- when he began as a photojournalist, did not consider photography as a viable profession. "Today, things have changed," he says, "as the environment is different as many of the good newspapers, such as *The Daily Star* are hiring photographers so that they are earning a decent living, and have prestige in society." Dr Alam is a much sought after photographer, with many overseas awards to his credit.



A gripping photograph by Dr Alam

Film review

## Cafe Transit: The saga of a woman's courage

ALI AHMED

After its formal opening on January 17, 2006, the 9<sup>th</sup> Dhaka International Film Festival, 2006, came to a successful conclusion on January 25.

On the last day, awards were

presented on the screen in a jampacked but completely silent cinema hall, the apprehension, to my pleasant surprise, proved unfounded.

The protagonist, Reyhan, the recently-widowed wife of a restaurateur of very modest means, faced the unsavoury but customary

or-die struggle for survival with dignity working in the kitchen, assisted by her children. Her exceptional culinary skills soon makes the place a swarming centre of attraction for truckers and commuters from home and abroad as the restaurant is located at a van-

although angry with the rebuff, always displays a modicum of respect towards her. However, his impatience boils over and he sends one of his workers to physically assault a regular customer of Reyhan's Cafe Transit, causing a fracture in his leg. This Greek trucker called Zakhario, attracted at first by the quality of cooking in the restaurant, ventured into the kitchen once and saw Reyhan working behind the scene.

He becomes nostalgic and is reminded of his house and his wife, missing for the last five years. He shows the children with gifts and proposes to Reyhan. Although touched by his overtures, Reyhan, refuses his offer. This scene too was mute and dignified.

True, Reyhan was no super woman, as any less talented filmmaker would have portrayed her. She at times, quite realistically, appears exhausted. Nevertheless she carries on her unrelenting struggle to survive and live a life of dignity in an otherwise hostile environment.

The film, however, ends with the Greek driver taking leave, Nasser's offer of marriage steadfastly refused, and, the law of inheritance being what it is, the Cafe Transit being locked by the government, with police standing by. Reyhan, her two minor children and the loyal shop assistant wait outside with nowhere to go to, and nothing whatsoever for them to fall back upon for survival. But Reyhan doesn't surrender to the easy but undignified way of survival. This will continue to remind me of a famous line from Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the Sea* where the protagonist mutters that "Man may be destroyed but not defeated". The director - scriptwriter, Kambozya Partovi, editor Zafar Panahi, the cameraman with his often brilliant shots and the actors and actresses have made the film a classic.

The author is a member of jury board, 9th International Film Festival Dhaka.



Asceno from Cafe Transit

presented to high calibre actors, actresses, directors and others. The Iranian-French joint venture feature film, *Cafe Transit* was awarded the International Critics Prize. It also, incidentally, won the best film award of the festival. The film, in my opinion, rightly deserved this recognition.

Although Iranian film industry of recent years is well established, *Cafe Transit*, was made by a relatively unknown director, Kambozya Partovi, and was not expected to be exceptional. However, as the story began to unfold

prospect of moving in with her children to her deceased husband's brother, Nasser, played by Parviz Prasto. He is insistent right through the film that she live with him as a second wife.

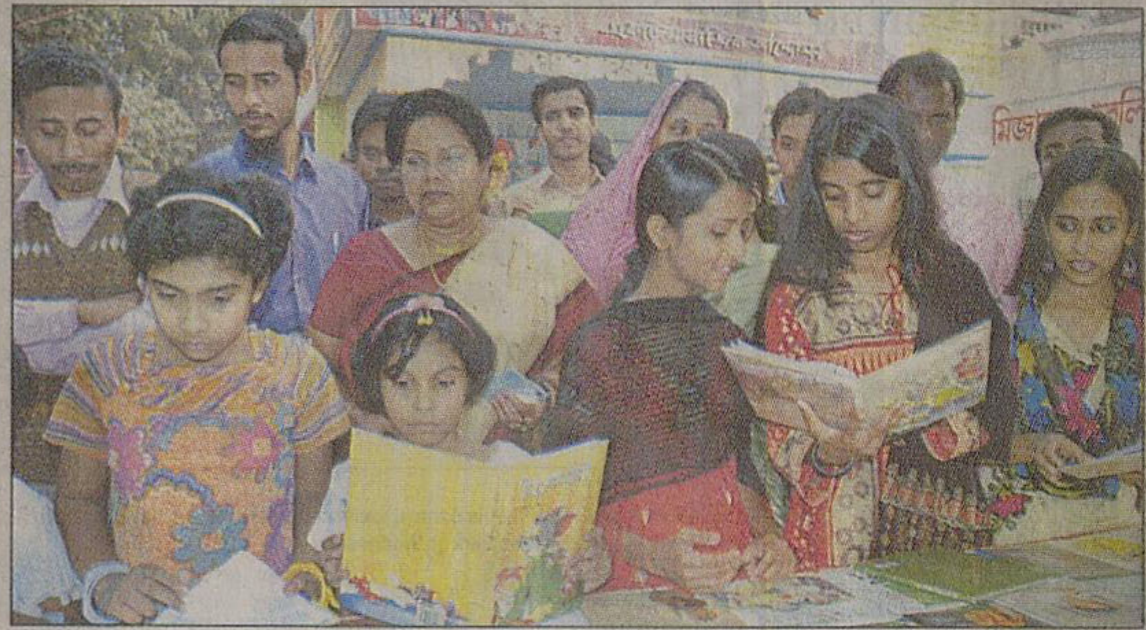
However, Reyhan, played by Fershith Sader Orafe, opts to live a life of dignity and independence by revitalising the restaurant left behind by her husband. Naturally, a grim struggle for survival ensues. Her dead husband's loyal assistant in the restaurant, fortunately, pitches in by serving customers. Meanwhile, Reyhan begins her do-

tage point beside a highway connecting Iran with Turkey and the rest of Europe.

As sales continue to climb, her brother-in-law suitor Nasser's restaurant, by contrast, witnesses a steady decline in business. Subsequently, he redoubles his efforts to woo Reyhan. But Reyhan, once more politely turns down the offer. Director Kambozya Partovi has subtly portrayed the character of the modest and humble, but supremely confident and dignified Reyhan.

The brother-in-law Nasser,

Young readers browsing the new publications at the Ekushey Book Fair. Booklovers of all ages thronged the fair on the inaugural day. The month-long fair commemorates the sacrifice of Bangladeshis during the Language Movement on February 21, 1952.



## Jatiya Potho-natyotshob '06 begins

CULTURAL CORRESPONDENT

Jatiya Potho-natyotshob (National Street Theatre Festival) '06 was inaugurated on February 1 at the Central Shaheed Minar. The festival's slogan is, "Awaken your conscience, let darkness subside". The festival seeks to generate awareness against the rising militancy.

Noted social activist Hena Das inaugurated the event. The festival is jointly organised by Group Theatre Federation and the Bengal Foundation.

The programme was presided over by the chairperson of the Federation, Mamun ur Rashid. General secretaries of Shammilito Shangkritik Jote and Potho-natok Porishod -- Golam Quddus and Mizanur Rahman respectively, Liaquat Ali Lucky, Keramat Maula, Prabeer Sardar and Rokeya Rafiq Baby spoke at the occasion.

Altogether 40 plays will be staged during the festival. Four plays were staged on the inaugural day, including Natyadhara's *We Are Looking for Shatrus*.

Theatre groups from 20 districts of the country are to participate in the week-long festival.



Actors of Universal Theatre Dhaka perform *Dateline-05* at the Shaheed Minar premises

Theatre Festival

## Heartwarming support for Jaglul



Shimul Yousuff in a scene from *Binodini*

KHALID-BIN-HABIB

Theatre activist Jaglul Alam is being treated for cancer in Mumbai's Tata Memorial Hospital. Jaglul's absence is acutely felt in the cultural scene, as he is a versatile theatre actor, director, playwright and a music composer.

Prominent theatre troupes such as Nagarik Natya Shampradai, Lok Natyadal, Dhaka Theatre, Theatre and others have come together to hold a fund-raising theatre festival to aid Jaglul and his family. The 10-day long theatre festival began from February 1. The festival is organised by Joghuler Jonjo Amra

and was inaugurated at the National Theater Stage, Shilpakala Academy.

Eminent artist Mustafa Monwar inaugurated the festival. Monwar is putting up one of his paintings for auction to help Jaglul. Monwar said, "We need to lend a hand to Jaglul's cause as his condition is

serious. He has been through chemotherapy treatments. Every day is a fight for life to him."

Noted theatre activist, Ramendu Majumder said, "We are fortunate that everyone in the theatre arena as well as theatre enthusiasts have decided to aid an ailing theatre artiste. The funds generated from this festival may not be enormous but the collaboration is heartwarming. I wish there was something more we could do for him. Jaglul is a wonderful, and talented writer, with an affable temperament. I'm calling out to everyone to attend the festival and contribute for a good cause. Interested individuals can send their contributions to Jaglul's account."

Theatre activists Mamunur Rashid, Liaquat Ali Lucky, Nasiruddin Yousuff, Rokeya Rafiq Baby and Ataur Rahman also participated in the discussion session. They made a joint call to artistes to organise more charity programmes for Jaglul.

After the inaugural session, Dhaka Theatre production, *Binodini* was staged.

## Photography exhibition on environment

British Council, in collaboration with Map Photo Agency, is organising a photo exhibition, titled 'My World, My Future 2005' from February 2 onwards. The exhibition, says a press release, is the successful presentation of the selected 48 brilliant images of the 32 upcoming photographers who participated in the photo competition on environment. The competition was organised last year as part of the joint initiative taken by the British Council, British High Commission and DFID on climate change.

The purpose of the initiative was to increase awareness of global warming and highlight UK's stance on climate change in the context of UK's presidency in the European Commission.

The photo competition was organised at the backdrop of the visual exhibition, 'North South East West', which was displayed at the National Museum Gallery from December 18-31, 2005. The objective of the exhibition was to look into the changing environment through the eyes of young Bangladeshi photographers so as to increase awareness on the issue.

Over 500 entries were submitted from 139 photographers around the country from where 48 images have been selected from the exhibition, including three prize winning photographs. The exhibition is open to all until February 28, 2006.

Newsflash

## China cancels release of 'Geisha'

The Chinese government has canceled the release of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, a decision made amid speculation that officials are worried the sight of Chinese actresses playing Japanese geishas would stir a backlash.

The film originally was cleared for distribution on February 9, but the State Administration of Radio, Film and TV reversed itself over the weekend, according to Sony Pictures Entertainment, which had planned to distribute the film in China.

The official reasons weren't immediately clear, and Chinese authorities couldn't be reached because offices were closed for a national holiday.

"We were pleased by their acceptance of the film in November and were disappointed by this decision," said Jim Kennedy, a spokesman for Sony Pictures Entertainment.

*Memoirs of a Geisha*, based on the best-selling novel by Arthur Golden, features *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* star Ziyi Zhang, former Bond girl Michelle Yeoh and Gong Li from *Raise the Red Lantern* as geishas -- entertainers skilled in dance, song and conversation.

The casting choices had stoked traditional Sino-Japanese tensions even before its scheduled release, with postings on a Chinese Web site denouncing Zhang as an embarrass-



Ziyi Zhang in a dance sequence in *Memoirs of a Geisha*

ment to China.

Many Chinese are still upset about Japanese World War II-era military atrocities in China and the lack of what they feel is a proper apology for them.

According to the film's producers Douglas Wick (*Gladiator*), Lucy

Fisher and director Rob Marshall (*Chicago*), the casting was an exhaustive, meticulous process that considered acting ability, star power and physical traits.

Source: Internet