

Gearing up for Pahela Baishakh



Like every year, students of Institute of Fine Arts (DU), better known as Charukala, are gearing up for Pahela Baishakh (Bangla New Year) celebrations. Planning begins about a month before Pahela Baishakh; the enthusiastic workers slog at it for two weeks. Charukala will buzz with activity 24/7 during this period. Life-size replicas of birds, animals and other motifs are taking shape, flamboyant masks ornate the classrooms and dazzle the onlookers. The activities often continue right till early morning, Pahela Baishakh. The preparations are for the parade that will start off from Charukala premises and will go around Dhaka University campus. One of the major attractions of Baishakh celebration, the parade, has become an icon in our country

Photography

'Heroes Never Die': Tales of Political Violence in Bangladesh

AHSAN HABIB

Saiful Huq Omi, one of the leading young photographers in Bangladesh, through his recent work (series of photos) *Heroes Never Die*, draws attention to violence that intervenes lives of common people in the name of politics. Omi has brought to light the victims of political violence whose stories often go unheeded.

Many photographers have focused on victims of political violence, but failed to find the root of the issue. Omi has made an attempt to look beyond the exotic when photographing these people and has tried to understand and illustrate the reasons for their plight. He avoids the terror, physical wounds, death or cry of grief; rather he focuses on reality, the spirits that keep their hopes alive in a world that they had never understood. This sensibility is key to his work.

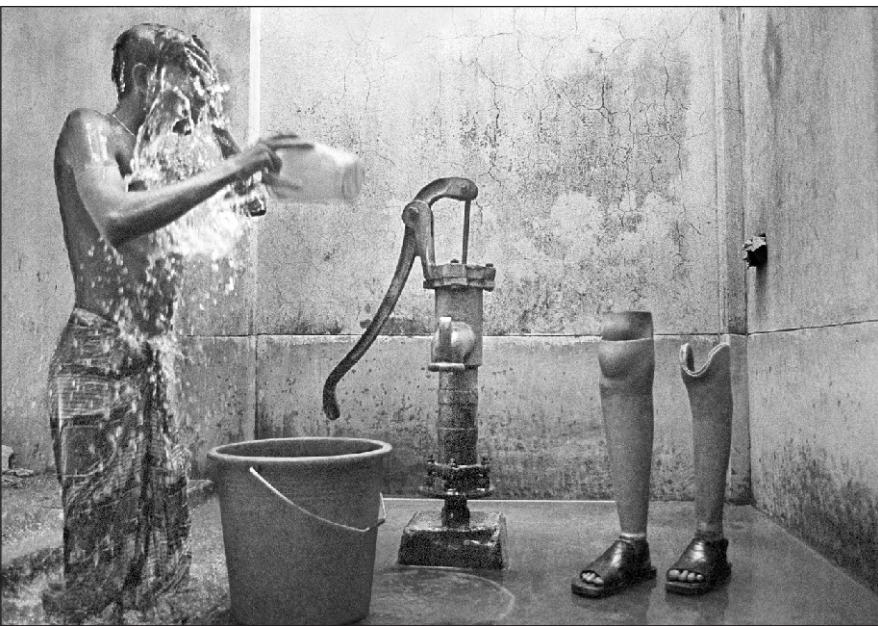
Omi considers himself a 'photo-activist'. He uses photography as a means to generate social change. Through the lens he aspires to bring about a change in the way we look at things and form opinions. His activism takes the form of putting political violence into perspective through his camera.

"We have discovered, through our work, through our political understanding, the major

part of the violence after Independence was against ordinary people, against their welfare, against their promising future. We stand against this violence," Omi affirms his stance.

He also describes the photographic journey as a self-discovery process. "I could never produce images that were in my mind to photographs during the initial stages of my journey. These individuals have taught me that losing a leg is not accepting defeat; our eyes and views are so much accustomed to see such people as 'defeated'. Our observation of these victims of violence are wrong; the struggle of these people proves it." Viewing those from the outside, his urban middle class mindset prepared him to face some broken and defeated people, but during the process, he discovered that they have kept their dreams and visions intact despite all the atrocities. "The hidden, soggy middle class inside me wanted to wake up again and again. I thought how miserable the lives of those disabled survivors are," he points out.

Initially the title of the project was *Stolen Dreams*. The treatment was quite different. But as he went deeper he found their dreams were not 'stolen'. In fact they have become stronger despite what they have been through. He changed the title into *Heroes Never Die: Tales of Political Violence in*



Shahin, a projectionist of a cinema hall named 'Ajanta', is a victim of the series of bomb attacks targeting cultural activities in Bangladesh. After the attack, Shahin lost his legs and the job

Bangladesh as he came to the realisation that, "how utterly shameless our sympathetic eyes are, how opportunistic and dominating are our looks!"

An amazing storyteller and artiste, Omi narrates tales that words cannot convey. In this more than a yearlong journey, Omi has managed to document the stories of 11 families that have been affected by meaningless political violence. Utpol Nokrek, Amar, Rajib, Shukanta, Anondo Mohon, Radharani, Probr Sikdar all have their stories. Omi has portrayed them in the context of their family life, concentrating on their familiar territory. In the photos they are not just victims, but their fundamental fighting spirit gets the prominence. "Amar hasn't moved an inch from his belief, socialism, revolution, equality...with tears of pain in his eyes but strength of belief in his voice...Utpal didn't hesitate for a second to stand in front of a gun...If they are not the heroes, then who are?" Omi questions.

Renowned photographer Shahidul Alam describes Omi as "a thinking photographer." In his words, "While his power of visualisation has never been in doubt, it is the reason that he takes photos which is more compelling... It is his concern as an individual that his photographs give us an insight to... It is the humanity of his images rather than the power of their construction that is centre to his images. The visual strength is a bonus."

Omi's body of work also shows signs of a talented artiste. Informed in the photographic seeing, codes and rhetoric, he indeed knows the power of the medium and the ways to transform them into reality.

Omi is pretty optimistic about the effect of the work in the long run. "Historically, a distance has been created between the majority people and the middle class. If our work can rebuild that communication to a certain extent and help reduce the gap a little, we will consider it a success. We don't often see the middle class become agitated when we experience drastic transformations and upheavals around. We consider this silence as offence. We hope that our work will break the silence for a while and will question their indifference at least for once," he notes.

His photos have already been featured in *Newsweek* and he is currently doing an assignment for *Time Magazine*. He has received acclaim for his work. He was one of the winners of *National Geographic's* 'All Roads Project' in 2006. Omi is currently working as the Bangladesh correspondent of *Polaris*, one of the leading photo agencies in the world.

Ethnic Diversity Council 'Biponno Bhumijo' screened

ERSHAD KAMOL

Biponno Bhumijo -- a documentary by Mamunur Rashid -- on the repression of the ethnic minorities by the Bengali majority, was screened at the Liberation War Museum on April 4. The screening was held as part of the 5-day Ethnic Diversity Council.

Rashid has focused on the 'land issue' to demonstrate the oppression and abuse. In the process he has presented the well-discussed issues such as problems in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, eco-park in Madhupur and 'forced' relocation of the ethnic minority groups in the North Bengal region.

Comments from minority group leaders and abused people, evaluation of the situation by Bengali civil society members and NGO activists who have lent a hand expressing their support to the minorities have been included in the documentary.

However, problems faced by smaller ethnic minority groups like Hajong, Khasi and others have not been featured in the documentary.

The screening was followed by a discussion on the documentary. The discussion was presided over by Shonjib Drong, general secretary of Bangladesh Adibashi Forum. Major General Amin Ahmed Chowdhury Bir Bikram was the chief guest and Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam was the special guest at the discussion. Ajoy A Mree and Mahtabul Hakim were among other discussants. Editor of the daily *New Age*, Nurul Kabir was the moderator of the programme.



A scene from the documentary

Discussants with their insightful remarks evaluated the issue and commended Mamunur Rashid for his endeavour.

Major General Amin Ahmed Chowdhury Bir Bikram said, "We should hold discussions with representatives of all the minority groups to resolve these issues. We should also plan agro-based development programmes in the region, where these people live."

Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam focused on three points that can be solutions to the problem. He said, "By setting separate land commission for the ethnic minority groups, quitting eco-park project immediately and implementing the CHT

Accord -- we can minimise the level of mistreatment and exploitation of the minority groups."

Nurul Kabir said, "When the ingrained intention of expressing solidarity with the ethnic minority groups is 'business', these issues will never be resolved. We have to approach the problems politically with a better understanding of the facts."

After the discussion, the audience critically analysed the documentary. Director Mamunur Rashid said, "We will erase all the flaws in the film."

'Hakkanir Dhonpan' and 'Srikrishna Kirtan' staged

On the same evening two plays were staged at the National Theatre Stage. Jum Aesthetic Council (JAC), from Rangamati staged the Chakma play *Hakkanir Dhonpan*, which was followed by *Srikrishna Kirtan* by Monipuri Theatre.

Hakkanir Dhonpan, an allegorical play in Chak language, features the victory of progressive people over the opportunists in the society. Disha Chakma in the role of the antagonist Hakkani delivered a superb performance. Her expressions, bold movements and voice modulation managed to overcome the language barrier.

Shukhomoy Chakma in the role of the protagonist Jhurgoram was also impressive. Written by Mritika Chakma, Faiz Zahir is the director of *Hakkanir Dhonpan*. He has set the play in dance-dialogue form. Accompanied by the rhythm of traditional Chakma instruments -- *dhudhuk*, *henggorong*, *mong* and others -- actors moved around on



Aesthetic Council (JAC) from Rangamati stage *Hakkanir Dhonpan*



Srikrishna Kirtan performed by Monipuri Theatre

the stage. But, the portrayal of conflict between Hakkani and Jhurgoram seemed monotonous.

Following the Chakma play, Monipuri Theatre staged *Srikrishna Kirtan*. Maintaining authenticity of Boru Chandi Das' (legendary Bengali poet from the Middle Ages) *Srikrishna Kirtan*, Monipuri Theatre presented selected episodes of the original poem through Monipuri classical dance-drama form. Shubhashish Shomir has adapted the dance drama in Monipuri language.

The USP of the show was that, the troupe did not emphasise on characterisation of costumes. Attired in their traditional clothes the actors portrayed divine characters of Krishna, Radha and others through movements. *Srikrishna Kirtan*, directed by Shubhashish Shomir, received a warm response from the audience.

Abu Sayeed's latest venture 'Banshi'



Filmmaker Abu Sayeed (C) explains a scene to the actors

Abu Sayeed, director of critically acclaimed and award-winning film *Nirontor*, is working on his latest film *Banshi* (the flute), according to a press release.

The film is set in the village Sonamukhi and features the dispute between two powerful families. At the centre of the film is Arif, a young filmmaker who dreams of making it big. Constantly in search of the right location and scenery, he decides to visit the traditional fair at Sonamukhi. On the way he meets Shaila, who is visiting her relatives in Sonamukhi. The story unfolds

from this point. Through *Banshi*, Syeed has delivered the message that enmity cannot be resolved with violence but with peace and love.

Abu Sayeed himself is the playwright while Mojibul Haque Bhuiyan is the cinematographer. Shaheed Ahmed Mithu is the art director and Junaed Halim will be editing the film. Produced by Mutimedia Production Ltd, the film features Tanvin Sweetey, K S Ferroz, Afroza Banu, Jayanto Chatyopadhyay and others in major roles.

Rangeen Utshob: 25 Years of Natural Dyes in Bangladesh

The National Crafts Council of Bangladesh (NCCB), together with the following craft organisations, is celebrating 25 years of the revival of natural dyes in Bangladesh with "Rangeen Utshob".

Participating organisations are Aranya, Kumudini, Prabartana, Tangail Saree Kutir, Kay Kraft, Banaj Barnali, Proshika, Ayon Crafts, Shishu Polli Plus, Shilleikon, Aakor, Grameen Uddayog, Banchite Shekha, Bain Textile Rangamati.

"Rangeen Utshob" will welcome Baisakh with the traditional red and white, red and mustard as well as vivid blues and greens. All organisations will display natural dye products in their respective showrooms. The main objective of the festival is to create greater awareness amongst the public about the beauty and value of the traditional Bangladeshi natural dyes.

The festival will start today and will continue till May 5.

'Savlon Birotihin Binodon' on Channel i

For a change Channel i will treat the viewers with uninterrupted entertainment. In the slot titled *Savlon Birotihin Binodon*, started from March 23, viewers will get to enjoy a one-hour TV programme without any commercial break.

The play *Ma-ya* will be aired today at 3:05pm in the slot. *Ma-ya* is written and directed by Ashfaq Nipu. Deepa Khondokar, Shamim and Mahmudul Haq Roni play the major roles in the play.

Three plays will be aired every month on first three Fridays in *Savlon Birotihin Binodon*.



Deepa Khondokar

'American Idol' and TV democracy

There are viewers who complain that there is something un-American about *American Idol* this season, and they may have a point.

The Fox singing competition that is under siege by supporters of Sanjaya Malakar, and *Idol* critics like Howard Stern, has upset traditional fans who feel that the inventively coiffed but reedy-voiced Malakar is not talented enough to stay in the contest. But that is the risk *Idol* runs by giving viewers the final say.

Idol, now in its sixth season, has its selection process backward. In US, people can vote for whomever they want -- even Al Gore in 2000 -- but the last word is left to the Electoral College and even the justices of the Supreme Court.

The most interesting thing about this season's *Idol* is not Malakar or Stern or even Simon Cowell; it's the current obsession with voting on television shows and Internet sites like YouTube.

Idol, which began as a British hit, made its debut in the United States in 2002. The talent show spawned a multitude of copycat shows with voter call-in gimmicks.

The high viewer turnout for *Idol* cannot solely be explained by technological advances or a regression in human nature. It cannot be a coincidence that television voting rights arose so soon after the 2000 election left slightly more than half the voting population feeling cheated. Those who didn't go to the polls and fear that their abstention inadvertently made possible the invasion of Iraq may feel even worse. *Idol* could be a displacement ritual: a psychological release that allows people to vote -- and even vote often -- in a contest that has no dangerous or even lasting consequences. (Even losers win out in the end: both Al Gore and Jennifer Hudson

ended up on the Oscar stage.)

In this electoral process, voters have the final word, not Simon Cowell, Randy Jackson and Paula Abdul. Once the early elimination process is over, the judges' role is closer to that of panelists or counsellors. They use their prestige and expertise to help viewers discern who is the most gifted and qualified contender, but ultimately, they cannot override popular opinion, even when it turns frivolous and favours Malakar.

Cowell told *Extra* that he might leave the show if Malakar wins. His threat adds to the suspense, but it's not very sporting. Cowell made a fortune



American Idol contestant Sanjaya Malakar, who is better known for his flowing locks than his singing ability, has clung on to reach the final 9

giving the masses a voice, only to now complain that the voice selected by the masses isn't good enough.

Idol traffics in the thrill of counter-consensus. Sheer perversity seems to have prompted Stern to champion Malakar, urging his listeners to heed votefortheworst.com, a blogger lobby group that supports oddball, least-likely-to-succeed singers. That's not a bad thing either, not even for *Idol*, which is not in any real danger of being ruined, but is instead coasting on a wave of Sanjaya-spurred publicity.

Idol is not just among the most popular series on television, it's an institution, and an international one at that. When an Iraqi woman won the Middle Eastern version of the contest, *Star Academy*, her victory briefly unified Iraqis, regardless of sect or creed. It's sobering to learn that after all the Bush administration's efforts to export American-style democracy to Iraq, the one element of American culture that Iraqis took to heart was a television reality show.

As *Idol* grows more stately and respectable, it's only natural for viewers to chip away at its veneer. Outsiders always have an inside edge. Malakar, who is of Indian descent and has an atavistic teen-idol sweetness, is the ultimate underdog: he can't sing or dance very well.

Howard Dean lost his chance at the 2004 Democratic nomination by letting loose an unseemly scream. The same could be true for the pet noir of *American Idol*. If not, it doesn't really matter. That's the reassuring thing about television democracy.

Source: New York Times