Omi's World

Saiful Huq Omi is one of the most acclaimed photographers of the country. In this write-up, *the Star* magazine sheds light on his life and work including his insights on Rohingya refugee.

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The shots that Saiful Huq Omi captures in his camera won't be remembered for their technical reproduction of reality but rather for their portrayal of the most basic right of humanity–the right to live.

Omi's photographs capture the collective grief suffered by the stateless Rohingya people over the last fifty years. He says, "We should not forget that during the liberation war, we also took refuge in India. It is our duty to act humanely to the stateless people who see refuge in Bangladesh."

Omi was born in a family that surrounded itself with every element of culture. From his childhood days when he lived with his family at the teachers' residence in Dhaka University, Omi was surrounded by renowned intellectuals of the time. He believes that this cultural environment shaped his life. During his first year in university, he got involved with leftist politics. The political ideology that he followed helped him to ask questions about each and every aspect of life in our society. "From that time on, I did not accept anything without questioning it," he says.

He wanted to be a filmmaker but ended up studying engineering. "That was the worst decision of my life," he believes, adding tongue-in-cheek that he went to engineering school to make his girlfriend happy. After his graduation, he met Shahidul Alam, the founder of Drik and Pathshala, a meeting that changed the course of his life. "The way he left his job in England and came back to Bangladesh to practice photography inspired me a lot. And finally when I met him, I decided to be a photographer and enrolled at Pathshala."



When it rains in the unregistered camps, the walkways become little rivers.

Just one year after taking photography seriously, he started winning major awards. In the last seven years, Omi has won an armful of prestigious international awards that ranges from the All Roads National Geographic Award to an award from the Magnum Foundation Fund. For him photography has been a tool to expose social injustice and to demand the rights of people, which is why he defined his work on investigating the life of people as photo activism.

During the liberation war, many members of his family were killed by the Pakistani military. The rest of his family was forced to seek refuge in India. Since his childhood, Omi has heard several stories related to that diaspora, and this influenced his work in the refugee camp. "My mother used to talk about war, how horrible the time was for the people who took refugee in India. So when I entered into the camp my mother's stories flashed before my eyes."

Besides capturing the diaspora of the Rohingya refugees, Omi has photographed the ship-breaking industries, taking in the plight of the hapless workers who have to work under inhumane conditions, often giving their lives to earn a livelihood. He says, "I prefer that my pictures, whether they depict the political violence or the Rohingys issue, tap on anthropological investigation. I want to portray the root cause of the problems, not just the misery surrounding it." He believes that a lack of political knowledge can only produce imagery based photographs not the real scenario. Thus, being a photo-activist means that one needs to be aware of the politics behind any social problem, he says.