



PHOTO: TAPASH PAUL

**A Pause To Breathe...**

**“ There is a silent triangular relationship between the space, the animals and the human. Love creates bridges...”**

– Tapash Paul, Bangladesh

**C**hobimela, the biggest festival celebrating photography in the country, has had an enormous impact on the photography movement of Bangladesh since its inception in 2000. The event has not just set a milestone for photography in the country but is considered the first and the biggest festival for photography in Asia, hailed worldwide for providing a platform for young photographers to showcase their body of work to a larger audience.

“Before Chobi Mela,” says Shahidul Alam, renowned photographer and managing director of Drik, “Bangladeshi photographers had little scope to exhibit their works in international festivals.” This festival, thus, began as a dream, a dream that quickly turned into reality for the talented, skilled photographers of the country. In 1995, Shahidul Alam planned to start Chobi Mela on a small scale. Unfortunately, a week-long hartal was called by the then opposition party, halting the event for an indefinite period. Remembering that moment, Alam says, “We had made all the arrangements to hold the festival but could not do so for political unrest.” It took another five years for Alam to realise his dream project.

The first season of Chobi Mela “The War We Forgot” kicked off the now widely celebrated event in 2000. The theme is self-explanatory; the event hoped to highlight the Liberation War of Bangladesh, a

struggle that was and still is unseen by most of the world. Alam felt that organising a photography exhibition focusing on the liberation war would mobilise people locally and internationally. Organisers, therefore, put together a massive archive of photographic works on 1971, which up to that point was never attempted before. The first Chobi Mela led the audience to a winding journey capturing the tumultuous moments of war and the horrific experience of the reality of the long struggle to freedom.

During the war some of the finest photographers of the world, namely Don McCullin, Raymond Depardon, Marc Riboud, Mary Ellen Mark, David Burnett, Raghu Rai, Marilyn Sylverstone, Abbas, Rashid Talukder and Kishore Parekh’s works were exhibited. Before the exhibition one could say that there wasn’t any collective photographic representation of the Liberation War of 1971. The exhibition aimed to stimulate an international discussion on genocide and the role of photography in rethinking history. As Alam says, “We contacted photographers from all over the world. We went through over 115,000 pictures. And eventually came down to a very fine exhibition. The festival itself became a receptacle for a photographic archive on 1971, which we have today. It is unparalleled.”

Chobimela will be reaching its eighth edition this year. In fact, today is the opening day of the widely popular festival. It has been a long journey. And as always, they’ve brought in new ideas and concepts. Since Chobimela VI, the organisers have not been pre-deciding the theme for the subsequent festival. Instead, on the last day of the festival, the organisers open up a public discussion, asking for suggestions for the theme for the next Chobimela. Suggestions are thus made and registered online. Online discussions are organised and votes on possible themes are registered. This year’s theme “Intimacy” also comes in on that way. Alam elaborates the philosophy behind the procedure and says, “Our ideology, belief on and commitment to social justice is something which determines the festival that we started. Once we matured to a certain stage, we felt that the public should have a role in the theme-selection process.”

Before Alam “Intimacy” is most intensely felt through absence. He reflects his thought behind the theme and adds, “We invite photographers to probe into the depths of personal space—to reach out to the wider universe, to challenge perceptions of belonging, to question ideas of ownership and bonding, to bring back stories of intimacy that will touch our souls and fire our imagination.”

Once the theme is selected, they produce a concept note on the elected theme to see how the audience might engage with the topic. This is then put on online to capture the interest of photographers worldwide. Over a period of time, the professionals can produce work on the specific theme or showcase any work that they had previously done on the theme. Organisers also send the concept note to curators across the globe who recommend photographic works which might fit the theme. And when the entire procedure is completed, the organisers call for online submissions.

Every year over 800 submissions are registered. During the selection procedure, they delve deep into several matters like technical, static and thematic issues. The curators bring it down to core submissions and sort the best works from a large number of submissions. One of the curators at Chobimela and photographer, Munem Wasif says, “We’re dealing with some of the best photographers from all over the world—curating works of photographers who have spent years trying to master their art. So we’re responsible for putting it up in a way where they will be well-presented and their context will also come through.” He also adds that there are a lot of logistical and technical things to worry about, and at the same



Will They Sing Like Raindrops or Leave Me Thirsty by Max Pinckers, Belgium.



Courtesy of Autograph ABP by Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Nigeria.

one of his friends asked a very important question—why do they always organise exhibitions in a gallery? Why couldn’t a hawker, rickshaw puller or a vendor see the exhibition while they plied the roads of Dhaka? How will the housewife from Kamrangir Chor know what the Chobi Mela is about? These questions moved Rahman, as he asked himself what would be the end result of such a festival if people from all walks of life couldn’t be a part of it. “That was the start,” he says, adding, “We started to think about alternative spaces. And then we brought the exhibition to Abahoni Field in Dhammadi. We arranged the photographs on 10 rickshaw-vans and they started to roam around in the alleys of Old Dhaka, Keraniganj, Kamrangir Chor and Karail slum.” Since that year, exhibiting the pictures on rickshaw vans have become a trademark of the Chobimela.

Rahman firmly believes that if the exhibition becomes a part of an exclusive domain, they will be opposing the principal that they began with. Therefore, they have always persevered to take the festival beyond galleries to ensure people from around the city could easily access and enjoy it. This year Chobi Mela has five exhibitions in old Dhaka in five different spaces. Chobi Mela is now the registered member of World Finale Forum, which will allow them to explore various dimensions of photography.

Shahidul Alam believes that photography itself is a democratic art form. It is very different from other forms of art. So participating in the process does not mean only taking images but also engaging the audience with the pictures. People who cannot read or write, who come from different social strata, should feel that they are able to read the pictures. “We had people walking on the street who stopped and commented, argued, and discussed the photographs,” he says. Elaborating on the philosophy of photography, Alam adds, “The same thing will not be seen in other art forms. The fact is that photography is a democratic medium. More importantly, we took photography as our medium because it is a powerful tool to bring social change.”

Once Bangladesh was portrayed in international media as a country of floods, poverty, crime and unrest, but in recent times this stereotypical image of the country is changing. It is changing not only in terms of trade and commerce but also in practicing art and culture. Addressing this idea about Bangladesh, acclaimed photo editor, Veneta Bullen said in Chobi Mela VII, “Chobi Mela absolutely inspiring. I have to say that it is beyond my expectations. Obviously, when people say that he or she is invited to Bangladesh, then the immediate reaction is ‘Oh my God, Bangladesh!’ When Bullen talked to her family members about coming here, one of them said, ‘What a wonderful opportunity!’ while the other one said, ‘Are you crazy?’ But the experience changed her attitude as she said, ‘I am glad that I made this decision to come to Bangladesh. I have seen the body of work of Bangladeshi photographers and I am very impressed that photographers work so hard for years. I will try my best to make it to the first world.’

Chobi Mela’s first and longstanding aim is to stimulate the power of photography in the audience. The event finds an avenue for common people to celebrate and rethink about history and time through photography. This year Chobi Mela VIII, as usual, hopes to surprise and amaze with unique, distinctive imagery. The immediacy of images can say much more than words, and that in itself is fascinating. ■