

SPOTLIGHT

A LONG WAIT

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"Dada, Dada, mahre basa!"—the last words Kalindi Kumar Chakma heard from his sister after she was taken away from his side. Somehow, he managed to escape but his sister couldn't make it. Kalindi mentions the names of the perpetrators behind this heinous crime (Lt Ferdous and members of Ansar and Village Defence Party as named in the first FIR) before the probe commission. Unfortunately, those names and the witness account were erased from the recent police report.

The abduction took place just six hours ahead of the country's general election on June 12, 1996 around 1am. Nineteen years ago, in the middle of the night, Kalpana, who was with her brothers, was taken away from her Baghaichhari house

in Rangmati. Many years have passed; Kalpana's family is still fighting against the state mechanism for a fair probe report on her abduction.

Recently, the iconic photographer and activist Shahidul Alam launched his second exhibition on Kalpana Chakma — "Kalpana's Warrior". Alam, through his exhibition, once again brings to light the injustice that has remained unpunished for 19 long years. He remembers the anger towards the Pakistani occupation force in the pre-1971 days and says, "I cannot imagine that we, the citizens of a free nation, are doing the same thing to our own citizens. I had been unable to do anything about it when it happened. I hope I can make an impact through my art, and help people to resist the

successive oppressive regimes we have suffered through."

To investigate the matter, the government formed a probe committee in September 1996. Without identifying or naming any person behind this abduction, the commission submitted its report on February 27, 1997. It also mentioned that there was no reason to take any legal action against anybody.

Surprisingly, without questioning the law enforcers who were identified as alleged kidnappers in the first FIR, the recent probe report read, "Kalpana Chakma was kidnapped either on her own wish or by force, but it was not possible to identify the kidnappers due to a lack of proper witnesses." In fact, the progress report submitted to the Rangamati Court



Kalpana Chakma

PHOTO COURTESY: DRIK PICTURE LIBRARY



The word 'fear' written in Kalpana's diary, from the exhibition 'Searching for Kalpana Chakma'.

PHOTO: SHAHIDUL ALAM

reads that Kalpana Chakma is one of the witnesses of the incident. It further reads, "Since the key witness of the case is the victim herself . . . the investigation of the case cannot be completed until she is found."

"We respond to things we can relate to. When we feel that this could have happened to me, to my sister, the victim is no longer the 'other', but of our own flesh

and blood," Alam says. This is the reason Alam is fighting to ensure justice. But can art alone fight for justice?

Just like others, Alam believes that art itself is not enough. The engagement with the audience and the strategy that the art is a part of is a key ingredient. Alam elaborates his thought on this matter and says, "I see my work as a performance and hope that the audience will take back a



Object from kalpana's room, from the exhibition 'Searching for Kalpana Chakma'.

PHOTO: SHAHIDUL ALAM/DRIK



Kalpana's Warriors – an exhibition by Shahidul Alam.

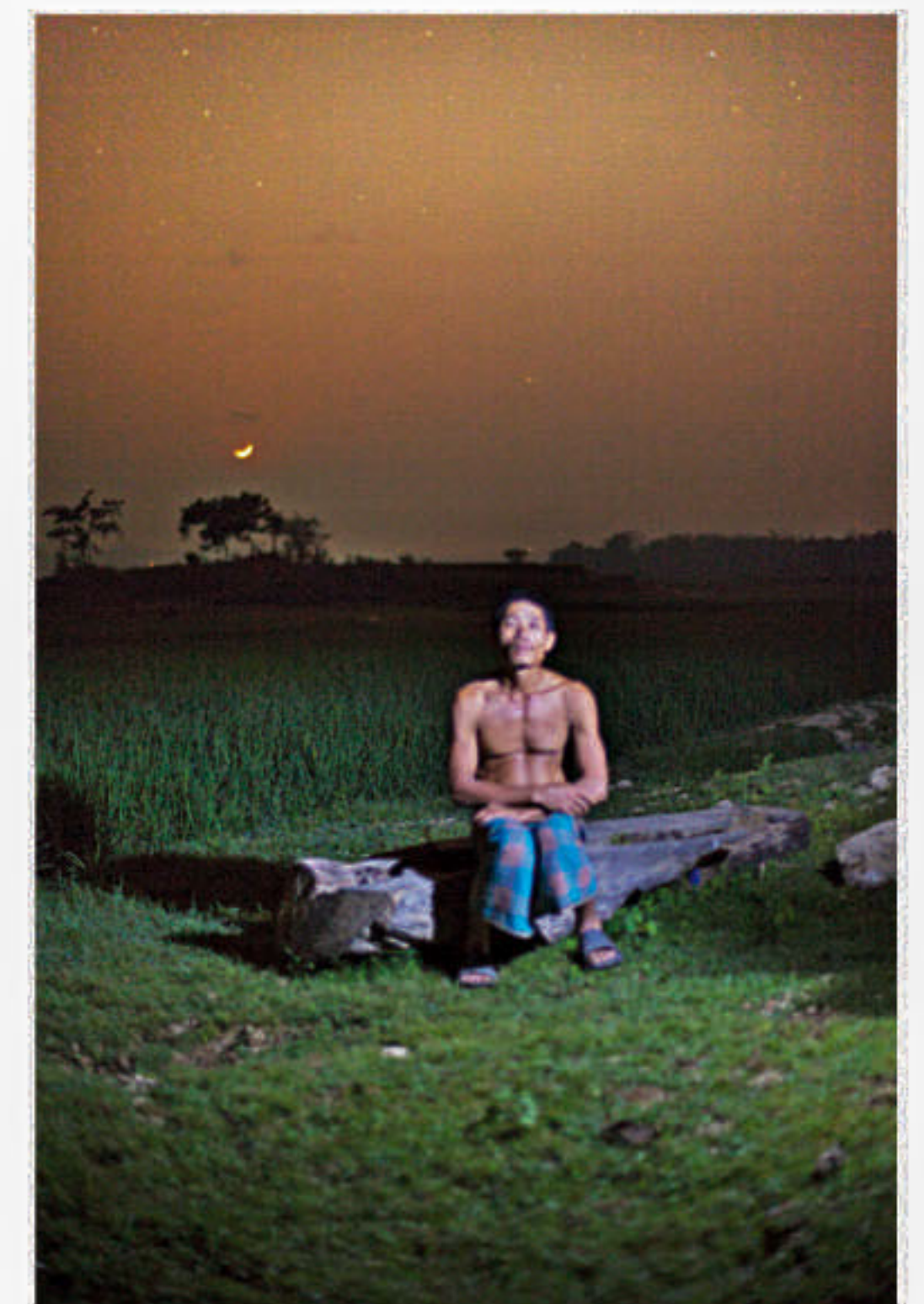
PHOTO: HABIBUL HAQUE/DRIK

sense of strength, and bond emotionally with my art and hopefully this will later help them fight other battles."

During this project, he also realised that simply expressing anger would not work. He needed an approach that would move others into action. In his words, "Hopefully, we will be able to move people where it matters. I was targeting the heart before targeting the brain."

Maren Stange, a well known cultural analyst, writes in "Social Forces Visualized," that a photograph alone cannot convey meaning to viewers. She believes that each photograph is "anchored in a fixed relation to its caption, to an associated investigative text, and to an authoritative presenting agency." Accordingly, the story that Alam tells in his series on Kalpana Chakma reflects the very nature of an appropriate context of feeling and anger to ensure justice.

The promises made in the Accord, too, remain unfulfilled 19 years on, with incidents of exploitation of adivasis, violence against adivasi women, land grabbing by settlers and state institutions and curbing of dissent, taking a more ominous turn with each passing year. This is a way of institutionalising the culture of impunity. Kalpana Chakma's case can be taken as an example while investigating



Kalpana's brother in moonlight. PHOTO: SHAHIDUL ALAM/DRIK

other abduction cases in the country. The International Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission (CHTC) called the probe committee report "absurd" and asked to reopen the investigation again. But for now, the flame of hope and justice seems to be flicking out. ■



PHOTO: HABIBUL HAQUE/DRIK



Shoe top of Kalpana Chakma from the exhibition 'Searching for Kalpana Chakma'.

PHOTO: SHAHIDUL ALAM