

Most Bangladeshi Facebook users are familiar with the name GMB Akash. Anyone who has seen his posts have surely been mesmerised by the way he captures the poignant tales behind the lives of the many survivor's existent in our city. The way he narrates each of his picture stories reveals his familiarity with the subject and his deep-rooted compassion for their problems.

Despite his extremely busy schedule, Star Lifestyle is fortunate to be able to interview the eminent photographer with an enormous heart.

**Q. Please elaborate some of your work as a social documentary photographer and the humanitarian efforts.**

Since the beginning of my journey as a photographer, almost twenty years ago, I have been negotiating with myself to keep alive the passion of an artist. Sometime later during my journey, I had a craving for more and thus began my involvement in people's welfare initiatives.

I began by photographing and conveying my subjects' stories at first, amplifying their muted voices oppressed by the morbid social systems and poverty.

My aim has always been to support people whom I photograph. I want to bring the greatest possible changes into their lives.

Based on my intense desire to lend a hand, I have dedicated my second photography book 'Survivors', a 10-year long project, to the people who have been photographed in the book.

ours portray the same scenarios. I think in every country all those who suffer are living the same lives. Whatever the culture is, the pain is the same.

I travel to cover all the hardships of their lives – of existences all around the world. Any human story which strengthens me is my project. I am on an endless journey following an infinite route, only to find a real world of humanity.

This thirst is eternal. I will keep walking, touching every face, through my lens. I will show the world – those unknown stories of suffering. If my single hand comes to give them shade, that will be the real honour for all my hard work and sweat.

**Q. What is rewarding about your work? What drives you?**

What I find most extraordinary about the work I do is that it opens my eyes to all the little pleasures of life. There is great pleasure in meeting people who are ignored by the world, in sharing a cup of tea with them, and discovering that they are still capable of affection.

**Q. Most of your pictures have a background**

place and their honesty in the most decisive place made it possible for me to do the emotional series.

I wanted to show the world, how beautiful some souls can be; how caring they can be in the world's most neglected places.

**Q. As shown in your videos 'Give me some sunshine' and 'I love School' what was your motivation to document and help the people you came across?**

My main motive is to touch people's heart through every event. It is not easy for me to distribute 1000 saris by going door to door, reaching thousands of elderly women. I did it only to encourage people and to take on my portion of social responsibility.

For years, I have been trying hard to encourage the extremely poor but talented students to continue their studies by ensuring their yearly scholarships.

All of these children are based in rural areas. Most of them never had any school bags; many of them cannot continue their studies because of the lack of books, copies, pens, pencils, erasers, pencil sharpeners, geometry

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'I got married at the age of twelve. My husband was twice my age. I cried whole night by sitting on my wedding bed. He was embarrassed. Shyly he said he will allow me to do whatever I want to do. He kept his promise. He brought me dolls to play. But my in-laws did not like my freedom. They asked him to send me back to my parents. When their torture became intolerable, by holding my hands he left his parent's house. Here, we built our heaven fifty years ago. I played with dolls and then with my five children. By fishing he earned for us. Every corner of our hut was built by him. I used to sit beside him, sang songs and he continued to repair our broken bamboo walls. One night he left me alone, died in sleep with a slight smile in his face. Our house was his existence for me. I used to touch the fence, wall and could feel him there. During 'Aila', flood washed away my hut, now there is no sign of my home. Still I come here to find a sign of my existence, try to find him in my lost home'

- SAIRA BEGUM

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## GMB AKASH

# THE LIGHT BEARER OF HOPE

Twenty-five percent of the selling price of the book will go directly to help these 'survivors.'

In 2013, I founded my non-profit photo school 'First Light'

(www.firstlightphotoschool.com). All proceedings from the school activities go to giving free education to working children. Besides all these, I am continually trying to engage the general public with my different social activities through social media.

**Q. When you are out and about on a project what subjects or things do you seek out?**

In all of my projects I never show my camera first; I mix with people and I try to become one of them. I travel randomly, sometimes repeatedly to one single place only to familiarise myself with their stories. My main intent is to focus on people who are suffering perpetually and dying every day from their struggles. Moreover, countries which are similar to

**story to narrate. Which one has been the most inspiring?**

There was a sex worker who went through a forced abortion. She had to attend to a client the day she came back from hospital. When I visited her she told me, 'Akash bhai, I will meet my child in heaven! Do you think he will be able to recognise me?' That was seven years ago; the day when for the first time I started writing in my diary.

I started to note poignant stories of such miserable souls. I found these people are the world's best philosophers. I witnessed how beautifully they met with pain and from the ashes of unhappiness chose to rise again!

My emotional thirst and their stark realities shook many of my nights. The sister in the brothel always keeps sweets for me never wanting anything in return. The people, who never receive love, truly know how to love selflessly. Their laughter in the world's saddest

boxes or calculators.

During the event 'I love School', many kind-hearted friends from my Facebook page came forward to stand beside me and gifted school bags and many other necessary items.

After ten days of travelling and distribution from door to door, the volunteers and I were able to gift 200 school bags amongst the very needy but talented students. We were able to make them feel that we care.

We care for their smiles, for their dreams and for their hopes. By documenting these events I want to encourage people to 'give' because we should always remember that, if we light a lamp for somebody, it will also brighten our own path.

**Q. Your subjects are mostly strong willed individuals; determined woman from a brothel, traumatised brain cancer patient yet unbending, man who lost everything in life yet holds on strongly to hope. What**

**kind of message do you wish to capture and spread across from these portraits?**

During the last twenty years, every person I met had a story to tell. I try to capture the beauty of the people and their souls. Though the real circumstance of some of the people I portray may be quite grim; they are all strong individuals with remarkable characters. It is my duty as a photographer and an artist to point out every aspect of existence in society.

I must show what can be shown; going deep into every milieu and into every aspect of poverty, deprivation and hardship that I can encounter – because the only sin for a photographer is to turn his head and look away.

**Q. What do you think makes a great photo?**

Unless I can manifest the true feelings behind a photograph through my camera, any picture becomes meaningless. For me

the main challenge is to convey the deepest meaning of a photograph to the viewer – so that it touches the heart.

**Q. How does photography in Bangladesh differ from any other country? Your subjects are mostly Bangladeshi, why are their stories more compelling?**

My journey has always been more than the portrayal of people; I strive to reveal the varied and undeserved circumstances each of them face – battles that are fought in a large part, with little more than fleeting smiles. I have travelled to more than 50 countries, worked in numerous mainstream projects but still I feel our marginalised people in Bangladesh have the most moving stories to tell.

**Q. Can you name some of your personal favourites in the field of photography?**

I very much admire Sebastiao Salgado. His work is a rich resource of inspiration. James

Natchway is also one of the most inspiring photographers as well as an influential person for me. All of his works inspire me. This photographer portrays the wars of the world but delivers the message of peace.

Do you have any words of advice for people motivated by your work and hoping to venture in the same field?

Do your own kind of photography and follow your own trail. As a photographer when you are able to discover yourself within your photographs, then you can finally consider yourself as successful. If you remain true to your work, then your work will always remain true to you.

**Interview taken by Mehrin Mubdi Chowdhury**

**Stories and pictures collected from GMB Akash and printed without editing.**

I am tired, very tired. I am tired of fighting for food, fighting to live, fighting for love. No one ever loved me. I do not know how it feels to be loved. When I will return from work my parents will ask for money, when I will give them money they will smile. Once I had fever and could not go to work for a week, my father took out my bed from the house and threw in the yard. Till I am capable of giving, I'm capable of living. When I was five months pregnant my husband disappeared. And I never saw him last five years. He never loved me, I had seen him with other women many times but I fought for his love too. I am a defeated person. Sometimes I feel like to go somewhere leaving everything behind. But I do not have any place to go. I hang on the train as I am hanging in my life. Knowing the train will never take me to a place where someone will care for me, someone will love me, but still I hang on and look forward.

- AMENA BEGUM



(Stories provided by G M B Akash; also available on his Facebook page)