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THE LEGACY OF LIGHT

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It all starts with contact with light. The process, as we know, requires light to seep into the lens in which the moment captured already exists. The exposure causes that moment to transform into a discernible photograph, an image with a story. The purpose behind Chobi Mela is intriguingly similar: to signify moments that have existed and continue to exist around the world, to process them through planning and curation for an audience, and thereby to include them into a narrative, into history, through 'exposure'.

LOOKING BACK

This intent for exposure was first born, and cancelled, in 1995. After six years of planning, the year 2000 finally saw Chobi Mela I, the first international photography festival of Asia jointly organised by Drik Gallery and the Pathshala South Asian Media Institute. The goal in this first installation really had been to expose, i.e. to bring to people's attention, the neglected and less glamorous parts of the

Bangladeshi Liberation War. Hence the title of the main exhibition, "The War We Forgot", which displayed the works of Don McCullin, Rashid Talukder, David Burnett, Raghu Rai, and many others under the unifying theme of 'Differences Unframed'.

20 years and 10 installations later, Chobi Mela has grown into what *The New York Times* this year called "one of the premier photo events of the year", gaining a reputation for being syncretic and for engaging in dialogue with the power structures prevailing in society. "It is about the cross-cutting theme of social justice, and thinking about how a country should run on the basis of education, law, and culture. It is about subverting the exclusivity that alienates photography into a separate niche, and therefore including all kinds of artists into the conversation," explains Shahidul Alam, eminent photojournalist and Director of the festival.

But it's neither simply the size nor the celebrity status it enjoys as an event, that

makes Chobi Mela an interesting player in Bangladesh's socio-cultural landscape. Chobi Mela is worthy of discussion because of the way it curates and displays history through various visual media and, in the process, adds to history as it is written and remembered. It thus adds to the conversation about what history is, who gets to shape it, and the role that photography can play in it.

Alam confirms how the event has expanded in scope over the years to tackle exactly these questions. "The topics of discussion weren't as diverse when we first started out," he recalls. "But we have sought to stretch out on both a technical and cerebral level. In terms of technology used, we've adapted video streaming for those who can't make it to the event (Noam Chomsky once live streamed in), and added more interdisciplinary displays in the exhibitions. In terms of analysis, we've sought to educate people that the visual arts are about more than just taking pictures, with the help of curators, critics, agents, photographers, historians, and writers all talking about their work. We've invited these people to speak about the politics of archiving, about what is and isn't given significance, about the value chain of producing art. Through these discussions, we've tried to create a space in which freedom of thought and expression can be exercised, most significantly in a South Asian dialogue."

"IS THERE A PLACE IN YOUR HEART FOR ME?"

Over the years, the biennale's themes ('Exclusion' in 2002, 'Resistance' in 2004, 'Freedom' in 2009... 'Intimacy' in 2015 and so on) have been coloured by the underlying premise of inclusivity. This year was no different. Reflecting on this year's theme 'Place', Shahidul Alam's poem for the event depicts an 'I' who searches for a home in sand, in soil, in oceans, forests,