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3. Naeem Mohaiemen's project "What was Chobi Mela and what happens next" was one of the exhibits set up at Gyantapas Abdur Razzaq Bidyapeeth this time. It's a non-linear timeline of CM over the decades. It starts from 1989, when Shahidul Alam set up Drik Picture Library. He has been vocal over the years about the need to recentre the "object's" role in the process of image-making and the power of the photographer in opening conversations about agency. Much of that politics has driven Alam's work from the early years.

In the heat of the current political climate and the urgency with which CMX was pulled together after Alam's release, the dramatics surrounding it has a lot to do about what is happening 'now'.

4. To many, CMX looks like it has been 'scaled down' from what Estrin once also called "perhaps the world's most demographically inclusive festival." The festival may have 'shrunk' within Dhanmondi's bellies; but it has also featured 33 exhibitions with works from 44 artists spanning 21 countries, 13 new fellows sprawled across two entire

dissent of the people for their rivers and valleys. So many references to "truth-telling", at a time when Alam just filed his petition to challenge the state's case against him for spreading "disinformation."

Beyond Alam's own troubles though, why is CM so concerned with truths?

"For any sort of festival, time and space need to be reflected. [Otherwise] we have to pay for the price of silence. This might be one of the very few places that tries to negotiate with silence, and see how can you still be vocal and relevant," says Wahab.

I am taken back to the story Alam once

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The curator also sheds light on the presentation of the exhibitions—an amalgamation of the artist's emotions and the artist-curator's strategy to shape the audience's perception of the artwork. "The artists get a lot of freedom in terms of presentation," says Rahman. "Jan Banning's 'Red Utopia', for instance, is a very classical exhibition on the faces of communism in five countries. The pictures speak for themselves. But we left one wall red. Immediately upon entering the room, you feel like you've entered a 'red era', an era of leftism and communism. So not only the photographs but also the entire space of the exhibition communicates with the audience from a distance."

A decision was made also to signify places that held individual, not just universal, value, thus making archives out of personal, local, and national images. So, you have Moushumi Bhowmik recording folk culture through her travels across Bengal, Rana Plaza victims' relatives displaying their personal belongings, Issa Touma capturing Syrian civil war from his window in Aleppo, and Ashfika Rahman presenting the physical and psychological aftermath of enforced disappearances.

Chobimela, beyond the walls of galleries

For art enthusiasts, CM provides a platform for communication, collaboration, and learning. Ashfika Rahman explains how, "It allows enthusiasts to exchange ideas with international experts. The festival is a place where knowledge and experience can lead a photographer to dream, experiment and step forward."

But the very name of the event, 'mela' is, foremost, a celebration. It's a medley of trades and tastes, of artists inviting audiences to enjoy their creations. By starting off with a celebratory rally, by travelling and holding discussions of ideas across the city, Chobi Mela this year managed to stretch the definitions of space. While artists and audiences from the world over flocked to the city to attend the festival on the one hand, the city itself rearranged to host them on the other. The biggest example of this arose when hordes of audiences followed the updates on Arundhati Roy's talk "Utmost Everything", switching from one location to another, from physical spaces to Facebook live, and by staying put at the changed venue when the session seemed near impossible to execute. Such movements, both physical and rhetoric, serve as acts of defiance when they are most needed. The event itself may try to present history, yes, but by hosting acts of resilience, of support for thought and culture, it also becomes mobile archive of history as it unfolds.



Less than 24 hours before Arundhati Roy's scheduled talk for the fest, the organisers were forced by the police to move from the venue in spite of having attained due permissions.

PHOTOS: TOUKIR AHMED TANVEE/DRIK

Pathshala South Asian Media Institute was established for photography and digital media, and a school is perhaps the prime breeding ground that one build in a lifetime for generations to be reoriented.

But his work cannot simply be his own when it has been about the politics of people and nurtured by a sense of community. Over the next three decades, we see how numerous other events enter into dialogues with his initiatives from different directions. The internet was launched and digitisation rapidly made its way into our sociocultural spheres; initiatives of contemporary arts were set up in the region by various schools and corporations. And what Drik-Pathshala-Alam set out to do could no longer be kept confined within their own practices, as the community's orientations found many currents to flow with. Mohaiemen's CM timeline acknowledges these developments over the years. After all, CM is not just an isolated staging that takes place once every two years—it's a social phenomenon.

Over the years, the idea of the *chobi* has been de-and-re-constructed by the festival. What we *see* is not so much about the stillness of what was captured in a frame anymore; it is also about how that frame can move within and out of us, as new media and curatorial methodologies arise.

This phenomenon has had many trajectories that Mohaiemen's project cannot possibly encompass. But when CMX opened on February 28, it was hot news for recent events surrounding Alam.



basement storeys, a record number of guest curators, and new additions of film screenings and curated projections.

This edition deals with the struggles of historical rhetorics in a world where wars and conflicts are affairs of global politics. Works such as those of Omar Imam, Issa Touma, Gauri Gill, and the "Archives of Persistence" all deal with conflicts that are not necessarily "recent" events, but are instrumental in how histories are told today and by whom. Mustafa Zaman's work reflects on "a moment for truth to arrive", and Arundhati Roy managed to still speak to an audience packed in 7,580 sq. ft. of floor space about the rage and

told me about the first edition of CM in 2000, when the headlining exhibition had to be moved from Shilpakala to Drik because of only one photograph of Rashid Talukder's showing the Kaderia Bahini guerillas bayoneting a collaborator in Paltan. 10 editions later, CM still holds on to the same spirit—to push through constraints on expression—because these challenges are not new to it.

And so, we have 20 years of CM's persistence.

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