

Chobi Mela Shunno – a new beginning

After a rather bleak 2020 due to the unprecedented onset of the global coronavirus pandemic, the dawn of a new decade acts as a ray of hope as we try to accommodate ourselves within the new normal. With this very notion, the theme for this year's Chobi Mela, the largest biennale photography festival in South Asia, has been termed as "shunno."

Shunno – an amorphous infinite space, which has the same beginning as its end, raises questions about the purpose of life and its relevance. "There are two reasons behind this special and self-reflective edition of Chobi Mela," stated Festival Director and Curator, Tanzim Wahab. "The first being that this is a time when we need to reunite and regain our willpower. Secondly, the realization that we are in the midst of a new beginning and thus, we must start to think anew."

Organised by Drik Picture Library Ltd. and Pathshala South Asian Media Institute, the 10-day photography festival was held from 12 – 21 February, 2021 and exhibited the works of 75 artists across eight curated shows involving six curators. Due to its limited nature given the current circumstances, the international event comprised of works from just five South Asian countries.

However, international visitors did not have to miss out on the most significant photography event in Asia, as everything

was available on the website. Furthermore, this time there has been extensive usage of digital content, along with the inclusion of panel discussions, artist's podcasts, gallery walks, portfolio reviews, educational programs and web radio, known as "Baba Betar."

Although Chobi Mela started as a photography exhibition, 22 years down



the line this festival became a platform to connect a plethora of photographers and artists in myriad ways. Owing to this, the 11th edition of Chobi Mela featured a range of multidisciplinary and experimental art projects to include paintings and installations as well.

Highlighting the changes brought about

by the passage of time, Shahidul Alam, Festival Chief Advisor, said in retrospect, "When we started back in 2000, we had only one digital print but now we have plenty! Furthermore, back during that time curation was less common, but in this event we ensured that every work of photography received the due treatment it respectfully deserves."

Reminiscing the individuals lost, Chobi Mela paid tribute to their contribution towards this field via two essential individual retrospective exhibitions. "Wishing Tree" portrayed the work of critically acclaimed Late Architect Bashirul Haq, whose very last architectural project was designing the venue of the festival itself – DrikPath Bhubon.

The extraordinary work of Sayeeda Khanum, a pioneer female photographer and role model for photojournalists was displayed in the exhibition titled "The Rebel with a Smile." Apart from these, a temporary photo studio had been set up named "Pappu Studio" with an attempt to revive the lost tradition of taking family pictures and dreamy photos inside a studio.

Among the various other exhibitions, [Off] Limits was the largest group exhibition, which featured the work of 14 South Asian artists that displayed works on socio-political issues and movements. Furthermore, the exhibition entitled "Bodh"

included the work of 14 young artists who have been awarded the Chobi Mela Fellowship.

The festival was inaugurated with a lot of pizzazz and the first five days were dedicated towards the most significant parts of the occasion termed Drik Day, Pathshala Day, Solidarity Day and Baba Betar Day. Among these, in Solidarity Day, several booths were setup representing various photography schools in Bangladesh followed by an exciting discussion session on topics of freelancing, journalism and photography.

Albeit Chobi Mela Shunno was geographically bound to some extent, it also connected cities via art. "Crossroads" portrayed a collection of four art collectives across three cities, which was a first in Chobi Mela. Daagi Art Garage, Colomboscope, Kaali Collective and Jog Art Space were all part of Chobi Mela Shunno, which warrants the solidarity among neighbours.

Chobi Mela Shunno was unlike any previous edition with its unique amalgamation of physical and digital content and extensive application of curation. Creating a common ground for artists, photographers, activists and visionaries alike, the festival was truly one of a kind.

By Fariha Amber
Photo: Chobi Mela Shunno

Shaheda Yesmin acknowledged as Master Chef by WAMC

In recognition of her efforts to promote Bangladeshi cuisine globally, Shaheda Yesmin has recently been recognised as Master Chef by the World Association of Master Chefs (WAMC). She is the first female member to be

honoured with this title.

The World Association of Master Chefs was established and is continuously supported by fellow culinary masters and professional chefs from around the world who migrated

to Australia in the early 1950s. The association strives to connect and combine the culinary art and food culture of the world.

For years, Shaheda Yesmin has penned the popular column, "Recipes from Siam" for

Star Lifestyle. She is also managing Jewel's Kitchen, which is a privately run cooking school where many aspiring professional and non-professionals attend to enhance their knowledge of authentic Thai cuisine.

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