Shahidul Alam On Freedom and Resistance

Shahidul Alam On Freedom and Resistance

A Conversation with Christopher Pinney

Christopher Pinney

Shahidul Alam is Bangladesh's best-known photographer and activist—and an emerging presence throughout South Asia. He is the driving force behind initiatives such as the Drik Picture Library, Chobi Mela, Asia's first international photographic festival, and Pathshala South Asian Media Institute, where he has built a powerhouse of talent by fostering and encouraging a uniquely skilled group of younger photographers and teachers. His work has been exhibited internationally, including Kalpana Shamsher Gallery, which we show in Delhi and post footage in Kalpana Chalana—an activist manifesto in Bagladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts—using innovative techniques to uncover stories of the life, struggles, and disappearances.

Recognized as both a cultural figure and a longtime dissident champion of the oppressed, Alam was abducted from his home in Dhaka in August 2021 and held in Interim internment in which he criticized the violent state response to student protests about road safety earlier that year. He was incarcerated for 107 days and tortured, and the incarceration triggered an extensive international campaign demanding his release. In 2018, Alam was awarded the Lucie Humanitarian Award and was named a Time magazine person of the year.

He remains on bail and on surveillance. Alam recently spoke via Zoom with Christopher Pinney about images and activism in Bangladesh and beyond.

Christopher Pinney: It's now been more than two years since you were arrested. What's been happening since?

Shahidul Alam: We've challenged the legality of the case. They've appealed against it. But that case is just so tenuous that they have to wait until they can actually win. So, even the course of time after that is good. I can be free while we eventually win.

And since we do, I have wanted to use the government for false imprisonment. Yes, I'm the first thing that happens. I have promised I'm going to do that, and I can guarantee you, as a Democracy-lover, I want to keep my occupied and prevent you from doing other things.

CP: Has your case had a chilling effect on photographers?

SA: Very much. Not just photographers but journalists generally, and free speech completely.

After my incarceration, their assumption was that since I came out I would stay quiet. But I have continued to say everything that I was saying before. Yet I have to be careful. I don't go around on my bicycle anymore, for instance.

I don't walk the streets on my own.

I don't carry a mobile phone. There are many safety precautions I have to take.

CP: In The Little Red Film (2020), your most recent book, there's an illuminating episode where the photographer at the prison in Kyamogram invites you to sitting advice on photography. So, it sets up one of your amazing strengths, which, alongside your extraordinary photographers, is being a leading of photography and of people's confidence and skills. I wonder if you could say a little about that encounter?

SA: When you go into prisons, no one tells you anything. You don't know what the rules are. I was treated very well by my fellow prisoners, so that was okay, although I wrote the ones who told me that "tomorrow morning at 5:30 a.m., you have to go to the Cox's Bazar." Cox's Bazar is where you line up, and you get your clothes, and your long stay that is taken.

So this guy knows what I am from taking my mug shot. We didn't really have that long a conversation. But later on, he knocked from the other prisoners that I was photographer.

This problem was quite simply initially—it was just bodybuilding. He had a bad time, and it was bodybuilding, so he had all this flam. I was able to set up a little mini studio for him, which worked wonders. You know, I have many years of having experience so that was something I was very comfortable with. There he took some pictures for me.

I was also interested in having good-quality photographs of the painted murals that I'd been able to do with other prisoners.

CP: Are you referring to the mural based on Bal Sali, which shows fishing boats at Thandaika, one of which has a vivid red sail?

SA: Yes, that there was about thirty-five murals at the jail now. It looks like a museum. Some of them are even there for tourists. Initially, the murals were of nature, the end of hacking you would have in the typical photographic studio, sea, sort-your-ups, of waterfalls and things so on.

CP: They were modeled on photographic studio backdrops?

SA: Well, the people who were doing it were mostly rape painters. I said, "Shahidul's is interesting. I've painted pictures of ourselves, if we told our story." We did that idea. Then we had a whole series of pictures of them in the workshop, going about covering life in their prisons, walls, in the library, and things like that.

CP: Bal Sali is pretty much an alternative national icon.

SA: It's very interesting you say that because, of course, the boat is the nucleus of the Amazon League, the government is power. So while I was in jail, I discovered that they had taken the image using my Bal Sali picture for the election campaign. We have a picture of the boatyard of four alleged collaborators on December 16, 1971...

WORDS

I wanted to depict Kalpana as this activist, struggling for the rights of her people.

CP: By Rahul Talukder.

SA: Rahul Talukder has been the image. But, in fact, the famous image is by Michel Laurent and Bryan Rae, who were the Pulitzer in 1972 for it. Talukder was there, taking the same picture, or from the same location, and made a similar photograph. But he didn't publish that picture because it was too dangerous at the time—because it gave a version that we denied. Officially, we were the victims. Things had been done to us. We in fact done in any war had things happen, and pretty much both sides do bad things, is something we were not prepared to admit. In 1993,

I continued him that strength into Bal Sali and that this was a historic image that needed to be preserved. So I published the picture for the first time in 1993.

And then in 2000, at Chobi Mela,

I did a show, The War We Forgot, about the Bangladesh War of Liberation, collecting work from pretty much the whole lot of photographs that happened to be in Bangladesh—Dan McCullin, David Burnett, Mary Ellen Mark, Raghu Rai. We also included Laurent and Rae's picture of the fishermen, and I had to explain that it was a bogus print. I was showing the war as happened.

And then, at 10:30 at night, on the eve of the show, someone from the ministry rings me to say that the picture must go. I wasn't prepared to do that. He says, "Shah, you either have the show or ... if that picture stays, then the show is closed." So we took the show down from the museum.

Now, it's not easy having three wives a museum. It's more difficult taking things out of a museum. It's particularly difficult taking things out of a museum at 10:30 at night when the only people there are the security guards. But we took the entire show out. We put up the show at our own gallery, and, of course, everyone

And then the government had to distribute its position. How come this show was not in the National Museum?

CP: Given the photographic, how do their circulate today? Are they now part of that narrative?

SA: Yes, though they are not celebrated as such. You can't print them. For me, that is the difficult space—the fact that, today, it's a particular version of history that cannot be contested, which is being propagated and established as the truth and and nothing else. We are trying to create this space for those questions to be asked.

CP: In The Little Red Film, you have an exchange at a 2000 exhibition, conducted by Pasco Poonam, at the Chris Yavro Gallery, in London, which you present as a kind of archetype of Western dominated, colonialist bit of photojournalism where white photographers come to Bangladesh, take the photos, and then leave. Those are the situations that lie at the heart of that exhibition are situations that through the suggestion, made by the same noted interviewee, that photographers in the Global South have to be more concerned to have their work accepted and circulated. Could you talk about that?

SA: Yes. It is a way, a show set up by respectable NGOs. There were good photographs, good photographers. But the type of images, that typical NGO "poverty porn" sort of thing, was there. It spoke to the direction of Pasco Institute, and he sort of defended himself by saying that the curator of the show and Chris Yavro, famous World photographer, don't have "the eye." I mean, he didn't say it himself, but he said it through someone else.

CP: Is that a purely transactional cloak for racism and discrimination?

SA: I remember Stuart Hall's expression that a Black man with a black camera will not necessarily take black pictures. The types of pictures I also depicts spoke to politics, which may well be very different from another person of color taking pictures. So the idea of exploiting a white photographer or a black photographer or a Bangladeshi photographer, for instance, as being capable of only a certain type of images is, itself, very problematic.

CP: In the educational work of Pathshala South Asian Media Institute is there any differentiation between a global traditional photographic canon and a Bangladeshi tradition?

SA: From the beginning, one of the things I've tried to do is to make sure that there is a multiplicity of voices and that we are teaching. We are teaching people to be able to tackle different points of view so that the students are aware that there is a multiplicity of values and approaches. But they need to be aware of it, they need to understand the logic, they need to understand the ideology within which it sits. And, at the end of the day, they need to decide who they are going to be.

CP: We have quite a lot to say about the importance and authenticity that photographers from the Global South can offer. How do you think that translates visually?

SA: One of the things that happens very often is photographers reduce people to tropes. So a brick breaker does this, a sex worker does this, so and so does this. The fact that we humans homogenize this you and me, and that we may well share, in that way, is something that often photographers fail to show. I think Bangladeshi photographers can be as Western in their visual grammar as any photographer. But there are Western photographers who can be as different from the traditional Western tropes as anyone else. Within that spectrum, we have to find the type of narrative that we respect.

CP: In Kalpana Chalana, you appear to be fascinated with the utopian possibilities of the indigo, of using the camera and very specific camera techniques and printing techniques to recover evidence. On the other hand, you presented the image in a different register by printing on woven mats.

SA: Kalpana Chalana was disappeared on 12 December 12, 1996, and the first show was in late 21, 2015. So a lot of time had passed, and the investigation was still ongoing. When the police did the investigation, they asked the Pahari (Indigenous hill people), they asked the Bangali settlers, they asked the military, and they asked the people of the Bangali settlers and the military were taken into account. The fact that the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts felt that their voice was not being taken into account. The abduction, they were responsible—all of that had been eliminated from the investigation. So my idea was to ask the Pahari witnesses what they had seen.

CP: Does that mean the insurrection object?

SA: Yes. I walked along the path that she had walked on, on the last walk that she made, and picked things up, resisting them as witnesses that I wanted to interrogate. And the technique used was Bishnupriya Tripura's idea. She had had them have a genius loci, a place where they could talk to her. And I thought that was fantastic. So I would have been a rigorous attempt to unearth what had actually happened. So it was a pseudoforensic technique that I was using to highlight the fact that the investigation was flawed.

CP: Could one then say it was an imaginative exploration of the utopian possibilities of the camera?

SA: I looked at the camera as a point of departure. I intended to tell a story, but I didn't want to limit it in the way in which it had been told.

The images printed on straw mats were the third in a series of exhibitions. The second is the one where we actually Kalpana's personal objects, which I photographed.

Because one of the things I wanted to talk about was the fact that left people were tortured by the Bangalis, and it was that silencing that allowed us to tolerate the Bangali settlers, the military and the government. So, I felt that the Pahari people had the weight and the right to speak its own language. We were developing a language of the right to speak theirs within their own entities space was something I wanted to unpack. I felt that was possible because of the silencing that was perpetrated. Again, I felt that I wanted to depict Kalpana as this activist, struggling for the rights of her people. I've spent a great deal of my life, I've made my mistakes, I've made my errors, but I've been trying to point to the missing person amidst the personal belongings that were here.

But the third level of work, the mats, relates to something I did a long time ago. It was a piece of work that I'd done in the period where I was using a room and going back to a white, classical approach to photography. You will know perhaps of the picture of Nawaz Sharif by Pervez Parkar. On his bum back is written,

"Let democracy be blind!" He came out in the protest against General Ershad on November 10, 1987, and he was killed by the police. I did a show on November 10,1989, called The Last Two Years, as a homage to Nawaz Hosain because he became a symbol of democracy.

So that series, which has become part of an ongoing body of work, The Struggle for Democracy, I have a set of two pictures of the wedding of Sheikh Hasina and the powerful minister. This wedding was taking place shortly after a devastating flood. I interpreted those pictures as an obvious statement—that this opulent wedding taking place when the nation was reeling from the flood. The Alliance Francaise was doing an opener the exhibition, but they backed off. The exhibition was hung in galleries in Bangladesh would show the work. The Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Dhaka, found a convenient excuse.

They said, "It's photographs, it's not art, so we can't show it."

Anyway, I managed to show the work, and I was very surprised when it was reviewed in a magazine owned by the minister's wife, the leader's mother.

I was fascinated. This piece is critical of the regime and what's been happening to it, yet it gets reviewed. So I was curious.

It was a beautiful review, which talked about the artistry of my work, the quality of my prints, the composition, the beauty, the aesthetics, of all that—completely ignoring the politics. That's when it hit me that this is how they manage you. You can be an artist. You can get your little award and your grant, and be reviewed and be famous. Leave the politics out of it.

So I made a conscious decision that I would not let my work be dissected from my politics. I would ensure that my politics were embedded within the work so much that you could not separate them. If you engaged with the work, you would have to engage with the politics. You couldn't simply look at the images from an aesthetic point of view.

When it came to Kalpana's Martyrs, the mats were basically all the furniture there would ever be. It was an quite important to me, "Here is a woman who was in Bali, yet she is such a powerful symbol, and the state fears her so much that they have to disappear her." And the state celebrated that.

CP: In The Little Red Film there is a very moving, remarkable letter Shahidul Roy sent to you while you were in prison, which must have been a wonderful thing to receive. Did your interactions with other activists who are not photographers have important to you?

SA: When I was in jail, initially, I had my way of knowing whether people knew what was happening. I'd scrutinized and rolled and twisted to make as much noise as I could before I got jailed in Dhaka. Very, very, [illegible]

I found out that people did know, and they would do things. But inside, I wasn't getting their communications. But I knew of the letter, and that was, it was smuggled in to me, so I was able to read it, but, of course, I couldn't write back.

But it meant a huge thing. First, it meant I was not alone. It meant that people who I respected and cared about, they cared about me, and we had mutual respect. Because one of the things the government was doing at that time was a very strong vilification campaign against me. I had all these lies children across the country. It's a Bengali agent. I was a tax collaborator.

The fact that people could see through all that, and still refuse to be proven that I was, gave me a lot of hope. And it was a lovely, warm, very optimistic letter, though it recognized the reality. The decision to stile the book The Little Red Film was based on that letter.

CP: Let's hope that it is already being read.

SA: It needs to. It has to. I feel that it is the one belief we cannot let go of.

I think it's something that I think is very important. I was known to professional circles before I got arrested.

But the average person didn't know me.

As a result of my incarceration, I became a symbol for resistance and freedom to the country people, to the ordinary people in the street.

After I came out, I was having the office, and as I walked out, there was a woman standing outside with a little baby. And she comes up to me and says, "Can you bless my child? I want him to grow up to be as brave as you." That was very, very powerful. Particularly because for me to do that was dangerous, because I am, as far as the government is concerned, public enemy number one. And to be seen with me, to be friendly with me, was not a safe thing. And she was of relatively origin herself, so far more vulnerable than you and me. Yet she wanted to express that, taking that risk.

Middle class parents say to their kids, "Keep your head down, stay out of trouble." It's not your issue. Why get into that? There was a woman who wanted her child to grow up to be brave, to be a rebel, to be defiant.

I think if the average person continues to feel that way, there is always hope.

Christopher Pinney is a professor of anthropology and visual culture at University College London.

More From This Issue

Contents
Issue 254 Spring 2024
Shahidul Alam On Freedom and Resistance
Issue 254 Spring 2024
Visible Cities
Issue 254 Spring 2024
The Photobook as Ritual Object
Issue 254 Spring 2024
Lorna Mishra Fuentes
Issue 254 Spring 2024
Written Surrogate Sara Berman
Issue 254 Spring 2024
Looking Out Looking In Delhi
Issue 254 Spring 2024
Arundhati Roy The City as a Novel
Issue 254 Spring 2024
Our Bodies, Online
Issue 254 Spring 2024
The Canon After The Internet
Issue 254 Spring 2024
Ten Years Revisited
Issue 254 Spring 2024

aperture/archive
Subscribe Now
Subscribe now and receive **every** aperture/archive has ever published.
Subscribe Now

More in WORDS

Our Bodies, Online
Issue 254 Spring 2024
The Canon After The Internet
Issue 254 Spring 2024
Ten Years Revisited
Issue 254 Spring 2024

All work is copyright of respective owner, otherwise ©2022 Aperture Foundation. Terms and Privacy

2 Articles Left. **Enjoy this article on us.**

Subscribe Already have an account? Sign In