





Palace Studio, also on Hospital Road, was founded in 1974 by the current proprietor's 'ustad' ('teacher') – Mrinal Karmakar – whose portrait hangs in the studio. The engaging proprietor, Shankar Rao, has been working for 40 years and observes that the vast majority of his work is passport/ID work with only a few *showkin*. The previous day he had taken two *showkin* but these had been the first in the whole of the previous month. It is apparent that Shankar Rao services a diverse customer base: He mentions Hindu weddings (mostly in the months of Magh and Phalgun) as declining sources of income (local photojournalists compete for this business) and describes visiting Muslim homes to record circumcision ceremonies. He notes that Hindus always request

post-mortem images for use as *shradha* portraits regardless of the number of images that may have been made of the subject during their lifetime. He showed me post-mortem images on his computer monitor and described the routine request for images of the formally and fully-clothed corpse and then a series of images in which specific relatives pose with the deceased before the whole family is pictured clustered round the body. Very surprisingly, in Shankar Rao's account significant numbers of Muslim clients also requested memorial portraits, the only difference being that whereas Hindu clients requested the photoshopping of the invocation 'Hare Krishna', Muslims request the Takbir 'Allahu Akbar'.



A little further down Hospital Road lies Camelia Digital Studio, run by Kamal Karmakar, the elder brother of the founder of Palace Studio. Among the many striking features of his studio is an elaborate display of Fuji 35 film boxes, and a *shraddha* portrait of his father-in-law whose face emerges from a Photoshopped garland of marigolds.

On the same road, towards the centre of town is a large studio, Banaphul ('Wildflower') founded originally on the adjacent Sadar St by the rather officious Anwar Hussein in 1968. Banaphul moved to its new premises a couple of years ago and in the process divested themselves of the several painted sceneries they kept at the old studio. These had been *maximum gramin* (maximum village sceneries) which were described as 'natural scenery' but 'polished': 'not jungle, but *bagichar* [garden]

but with small huts next to a river'. I would soon encounter many examples of exactly this in the nearby hamlet of Banaripara. Anwar thought that the preference for rural sceneries reflected the village origins of many of his customers but experience from elsewhere and the dialectics of 'altentity' suggest that these may have been rural migrants - newly urban-residents - who yearned for what they had lost. But Banaphul was most memorable for a large flex image of a hero from 1971 hanging prominently on the wall. The hero was Major M. A. Jalil the Sector Commander and the image showed him in a gunboat, the narrative being that he had just liberated the nearby town of Khulna and was en-route Barisal. He subsequently became involved in founding the Jatoya Samajtantrik Dal (the National Socialist Party [sic]) and died in 1989.



Among the most prosperous of the city studios is the strikingly named 'NthFotoz'. Equally noteworthy is the fact that the proprietor of 14 years, Israt Jahan Sonya, is female, being the niece of the mathematically-inclined founder, Tawhidul Islam. Tawhidul had established the studio in 2005 and spent, according to his niece, three months struggling to come up with a name and spent some considerable time 'searching in dictionaries' for a suitable moniker. As Israt Jahan explained it, Nth (the name of the original

studio) was intended to 'stand for modernity... mathematically it stands for the end point in a circle' and means 'the ultimate'. Many customers ask about the meaning, she added, and this is the explanation she always gives. In keeping with its recondite name, NthFotoz conceals a swish interior, featuring a huge photographically printed backdrop of the Stockholm waterfront at night.





Banaripara is about 40 minutes travel by auto-rickshaw from Barisal. The road is beautiful, passing an idyllic forest-enclosed lake and passing through several villages whose inhabitants have spread rice stalks across the road so that the tyres of passing traffic might thresh it as they roll over them.

The road leads to a ferry and the buses from Barisal stop well short of this right in front of the largest studio in the town, Sahid Art. The premises consist of a separate reception and studio area, the former being decorated with an imposing heavily montaged image of the proprietor's daughter and several hundred smaller images neatly displayed in precisely measured rows and grids. The immediate impression is of a fecundity of photographic images and a sense of continuity and prosperity. In close proximity are three other studios with very different histories and clienteles. Sahid Art, also known as Chamok Digital Studio, is run by the talented and ebullient Shahidul Islam. Perhaps alluding to the nature of local market competition, Shahidul expressed

his 'shame' at how easy it is for anyone, regardless of training, to spend a thousand Taka on something they would then call a 'Digital Studio'. They are established by 'photographers' who know nothing of aesthetics, or colour corrections. They cannot even pronounce 'edit' correctly he observes laconically. Fired up with frustration about the decline of artistry, Shahidul then recalled his earlier career as a painter during which he had painted a selection of very lifelike fishes. The painting was sent to a relative who was contesting an election and was printed on large banners as part of the campaign. So lifelike were the fishes that 'thousands of crows' were attracted to the image and tried to eat them.¹ Here Shahidul unknowingly articulated one of the key motifs identified by Kris and Kurz in their study of 'artist as magician' namely the 'narrative formula [...] designed to leave no doubt as to the artist's capabilities' and in which 'the master painted a bit of nature so skilfully that observers mistook it for the real thing'. Shahidul's story uncannily echoes the myth of Zeuxis and Parrhasios as popularized by Pliny: 'Zeuxis painted grapes:

¹ Interview with Shahidul Islam 8th September 2019



some sparrows flew by and pecked at the grapes. Parrhasios then asked Zeuxis to accompany him to his studio, where it he would demonstrate that he could do something like it. In the studio, Zeuxis asked Parrhasios to pull back the curtain covering the picture. But the curtain was painted. Zeuxis acknowledged Parrhasios's superiority: 'I took in the sparrows, but you took me in'.²

When I first met Shahidul in May 2018 (I would meet him again 18 months later), he had eagerly retrieved a pot stuffed with old paint brushes from an outhouse at the back of the studio and had used these to support his argument concerning training and manual skill as the foundation for successful photography. His own transition from painting to photography gave him a special resilience, he argued, in the fast changing world of photography whereas those who had entered the digital age without any knowledge of analogue artistry were most likely to fail.

Shahidul eulogized analogue photography while acknowledging that digital was a necessary practice in the

present. Digital, nevertheless, could not replace analogue: the 'setting' and 'light concept' was completely different. This was reflected in the dramatic changes in the layout of the studio: digital required less lighting, and camera distances and tripod positions had changed. In pursuit of the analogues aesthetic Shahidul retrieved numerous analogue prints from drawers beneath his desk. A young boy was clutched by his proud father on a motorbike, a bride swathed in a red veil met the camera's gaze with her piercing stare, an older woman gazed entranced, her hands folded underneath her neck in a movie star pose, and he proffered also a tender portrait of Shahidul's own daughter, her head diagonally tilted and delicate backlighting catching individual strands of her hair to produce a subtle halo effect. Studying these images in retrospect one is forced to the conclusion that the singularity and scarcity of analogue film imposed a degree of preparation and care that is usually lacking in a fast world of digital plenitude. The images are invested with time spent in finessing pose

² Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment*. New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 8, 62.



and lighting, contrast and soft illumination being perfected through the expert positioning of several studio lights. Looking at these images, many slightly disfigured by surface abrasions and damp, one thinks of Walter Benjamin's fascination with early Daguerreotypes, portraits in which so much exposure time is compressed that one has the impression that the sitters can see us the beholders. In those photographic incunabula 'the procedure itself caused the subjects to live their way into, rather than out of, the moment; during the long duration of the exposure, they grew into the picture, in the sharpest contrast with appearances in a snapshot'.³

Shahidul's analogue prints which he so enthusiastically splay out along his desk initially seem dull and archaic, inadequate antecedents to the vibrant and assertive colour saturated digital prints that mostly line the walls and windows of the studio. But a kind of deep spectating, unfolding in a prolonged moment of viewing starts to unlock their particular presence. It is almost

as if the elongated time of their making demands a reciprocal time of viewing. It is then that the slowly compacted time of Shahidul's portrait events unfurl in front of the beholder.

The difference between analogue and digital was also evident in the nature of backdrops: Photoshop gave him access to an infinitely extended range of possibilities. The displays in his studio provided rather uncommonly vivid testimony to the patriotic identifications that backdrops facilitated, these operating in an explicit spectrum of signification rather than the 'tacit' identifications more commonly found elsewhere.⁴ Among images displayed in the studio was a photograph taken on Bangladesh National Day showing a young woman in a sari and blouse echoing the colours of the national flag seated in front of the Shaheeh Minar also known as the Language Movement Martyrs Memorial, an elegant structure adjacent to Dhaka University. The large sculptural form next to the university is replicated in miniature form all over the

³ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art of in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 280.

⁴ Karen Strassler, *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java*. Durham, N. C.: Duke University Pres, 2010, p. 89 ff.



country. There are iterations of it in markets (eg in Dhaka's Newmarket) and small versions of it are to be found in many schools.

However, not all memorialisations of Bangladesh's political trauma speak to a unified national sentiment. One image of a young boy waving Bangladeshi flags positions him in front of the National Martyrs' Monument (Jatiyo Smriti Shoudho) at Savar, but the angle of view chosen discloses (and partially obscures) a memorial plaque marking the assassination of President Ziaur Rahman on May 30st, 1981. Rahman, famous for his Chittagong radio broadcast in 1971 subsequently swung to the right and established the Bangladesh National Party characterized by a growing authoritarianism and Islamization. The BNP is now led by his widow Khaleda Zia. This photograph thus tacitly attests to the BNP allegiance of the boy's family.

Backdrops of a very different kind can be found in another Banaripara studio, about one hundred yards away, whose history also reveals the simultaneous dereliction and

revitalisation of photostudios in this small hamlet. It is managed by Taposh Chandra Haskel, who has worked in photography for 41 years, the early part of his career being spent in Barisal. He established his studio, Shathi ('Companion'), in Banaripara in 2008 when the only other studio was Sahid. Shathi is an unassuming concrete and metal structure with the proprietor's desk directly abutting the still busy narrowing road that leads to the older and poorer part of town.

There are now a total of six studios, this number indexing the continuing (and here, growing) importance of studios in the local image-scape. Taposh provides a different authentication of his credentials as an artist: the customers in the Barisal studio knew him better than the owner of the studio because of the excellence of his work and this made him realise that he had to set up his own studio).

Taposh, like Sahid is dismissive of their recent competitors observing that 'anyone with a computer and printer can claim to be a photographer', a pointed barb directed at a couple of small and under-resourced studios on the other side of the road. He, by



contrast, received his training through exposing and retouching 120 medium format negatives. Other recent developments are disparaged: customers now rarely request *showkin*, coming to the studio mainly for ID photos for bureaucratic purposes. Digital's technical demands also contribute to the different quality of time: analogue cameras required little maintenance (maybe once every 15 years) and rarely required replacement. Nowadays computers and printers need continual repair and digital cameras have to be replaced rapidly as pixel rates and file sizes increase and customers expect to be pictured by state of the art equipment.

To appreciate how much has changed one only needs to wander into the capacious back

room of the studio where several hand-painted backdrops still adorn the walls. Although a pair of Simplex light stands at the ready, no customer has requested any of these backdrops for at least 5 years. The backdrops suggest photography's 'elsewhere', its powerful ability to summon fantasies of travel, difference, and excess. The best preserved is a naively rendered beach fringed by palm trees and enclosed by a double line of red flowers. A jet plane flies over the top right of the image adding to the sense of freedom and consumption that so much studio photography invokes.

At right angles to this beach scene is a more recently painted mural picturing a luxurious pink two storey villa beside a meandering stream fringed with flowers, and on the wall next



to this is a river scene, more recognisably local, of the sort that one might see on the back of a cycle rickshaw.

It took four visits to Rixon Digital Studio before I met the proprietor, a young man after whom the studio was named. The space is tiny and rudimentary, a section in a row of wooden shacks with a hand-painted sign and small glass fronted desk on which a battered computer sits. A few young men are waiting outside to collect photographs and two schoolgirls pass by on their way home, wearing

white *niqabs* and blue *abaya* and burdened with heavy homework-stuffed backpacks. Just inside the studio two sections of the walls were covered with neatly pinned photographs of women, all vividly printed with Photoshopped (and mostly 'natural' or garden) backdrops. Some are full figure, some half, others are quarter length portraits. Nearly all wear saris (a possible though far from determinant sign of being Hindu); one subject wears a hijab. Several are seated on the ground in filmi-inspired poses and one of the images is a postcard of



a film star lending even more shine to an already strikingly glamorous assemblage. En masse they suggested a fecundity and prosperity very much at odds with the basic surroundings where they had been made. Rixon has 16 years photographic experience having previously worked at a studio run by his maternal uncle and established this studio four years ago. He was gifted a collection of some 700 digital backdrops by the studio in Barisal where he gets his images printed;

The majority of the 700 backdrops can be classified in three main groupings: ‘xeno-nature’, ‘Barisal Baroque’, and ‘*prem*’ (love and marriage).

Xeno-nature assembles an exotic set of landscapes suggestive of fecundity and vitality, and perhaps divine omnipotence. Landscapes are noth picturesque and also sublime but they are all equally beautiful. They range across all ecosystems and terrains and suggest the compulsion to use photography as a technology for displacement.

The second category, ‘Barisal Baroque’ is more whimsical and gathers extraordinary examples of the built environment. Desired

architectural styles range from Rococo through Chinoiserie to domestic modern. The Wizard of Oz-inspired city emerging from an enormous toxic toadstool (on which a helicopter appears to be dropping abseiling ropes) serves as a good leitmotif for these globally circulating images that find themselves deposited in unlikely destinations.

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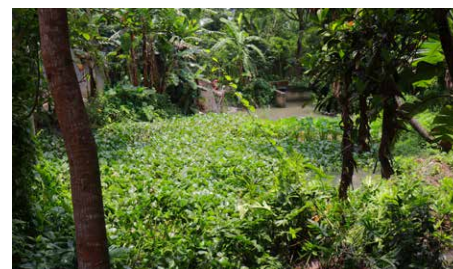
The third category is ‘*prem*’: here meaning romantic love but which also brings marriage in its train. While on the one hand appearing to mobilize the most sentimental and conventionally metaphorical visualisations of love (hearts, roses), and an insistent banality marked by the redundancy of the metaphor



and slogan ('I love you') these images also mark out a pathway entailing marriage (symbolized by the rose strewn bed), and progeny (note the children lurking in the background of the heart at bottom left). But conventionality is counterpointed by the indexical claims made by nature's manifestation of the same visual language: the clouds assume interlinked heart shapes and besotted trees entwine each other in permanent alliance. These echo an expectation that nature should signify the divine. Here we can detect a general South Asian demotic (and frequently nationalistic) poetics that reveals a preference for immutable natural signs that has much in common with European Romanticism.

All three idioms (xeno-nature, Barisal Baroque, and prem) are characterized 'Infinite Sublimation'. In the first case locality is relinquished in favour of sublime and aesthetic effect, world-topography serving as a repertoire and resource for enhancing the quotidian. This is very marked in the (Indian) Marwari-Nathdvara collages: Switzerland offers a sublime ratio better than that of Braj and

hence Krishna subdues Kaliya in the Riffelsee with the Matterhorn rising in the background. In Bangladesh this craving for exotic topography is most evident at Jaflong where visitors flock to see boulders (large stones are objects of fascination in an otherwise silt-rich country), and to gaze in excitement across the border to India. The Jaflong phenomena can be understood as an exercise in displacement, one that is subject to very intense photographic memorialisation. The other aspect of Infinite Sublimation involves what we might think of as 'Infinite Saturation' in which more is more. Colours can never be too rich or bright, mountains never too high, there can never be too many flowers or red hearts, or cooing love-birds.





Citizens of Photography: the Camera and the Political Imagination



The PhotoDemos project is an empirical anthropological investigation into the relationship between “representation” through everyday images and “representation” through politics.

The PhotoDemos Collective is a group of six researchers.

The names of the researchers and the countries in which they researched are:

Naluwembe Binaisa (Nigeria)
Vindhya Buthpitiya (Sri Lanka)
Konstantinos Kalantzis (Greece)
Christopher Pinney (Bangladesh, India, and Nepal)
Ileana L. Selejan (Nicaragua)
Sokphea Young (Cambodia)

The project is based in the Department of Anthropology at UCL and is funded by a European Research Council Advanced Grant no. 695283.

More information on <https://citizensofphotography.org>

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