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# THE DIFFERENT SHADES OF SHAHIDUL ALAM

The first retrospective of Alam in Asia doesn't just sketch a portrait of him as a photographer but also as a humanitarian at heart

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At Emami Art, Kolkata, a series of portraits, painted on straw mats, stand tall. The calm expressions of the subjects are a stark contrast to the violent history behind the images. *Kalpana's Warriors*, the series by Bangladeshi photographer-activist Shahidul Alam, pays homage to Kalpana Chakma, an indigenous rights activist from the Chittagong Hill Tracts area who was abducted at gunpoint in 1996 and has not been seen since. The portraits are of people who have tried to break the silence around Chakma's disappearance over the years.

It is a rare opportunity to see not only these seven portraits but also 60 other works by Alam. His first retrospective in Asia, titled *Singed But Not Burnt*, the show has been curated by Ina Puri and looks back at his four-decade practice. At a time when the tenets of tolerance, equality and freedom are under attack everywhere, Alam's works become even more relevant.

The collection features portraits, landscapes of climate disasters, the everyday struggles of people—framing not just a portrait of Alam the photographer but of a man who is a humanitarian at heart. The title draws from his statement: "As journalists we need to feel the heat, to stand close to the fire, but then we also risk being burnt. If we were to take one step back, we become ineffective. The trick, therefore, is to get singed but not burnt."

"It is important that works of poets, photographers, film-makers and artists are shown widely. There has to be a space where politics, divides and barriers don't exist. I think art is that space, full of openness, transparency and integrity. That has been the language of Shahidul Alam's work for many decades now," says Puri.

Alam, who founded the Drik Picture Library in 1989, started the Chobi Mela International Photography Festival in 2000 and authored *My Journey As A Witness*—described by John Morris, the former picture editor of *Life* magazine, as "the most important book ever written by a photographer"—has been an impactful figure in the cultural landscape of South Asia. He is known not just for image-making but also his vocal stance on politics. In August 2018, he was arrested for criticising the Bangladesh government's response to protests for road safety. He was released a few months later after human rights organisations and personalities such as Noam Chomsky questioned his arrest.

Puri's association with Alam and his partner, Rahnuma Ahmad, goes back many years. Her aunt, Mahasweta Devi, had participated in one of the editions of the Chobi Mela, in a session with Chomsky. "Shahidul and Rahnuma



(above) 'Onno Chokhe Dekha'; and 'The Champions Of Our Development'. PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY THE ARTIST/EMAMI ART

used to call her *didi*. So, there are different layers to my association with both," adds Puri.

She had shown some of the images from *Kalpana's Warriors* in Delhi in 2016 but had been hoping to do a bigger show. For *Singed But Not Burnt*, Puri spent considerable time at Alam's home, going through thousands of images. His early works consist of exquisite photorealistic images—like one of trees surrounded by a lake of flowers. The shift towards more journalistic work becomes evident in images such as *Crossfire* (2010), which show the locations of extrajudicial killings in Bangladesh.

These shifts are reflected in the exhibition. "Shahidul has experimented with different kinds of subjects. We were able to only include 60 photos and a separate section on *Kalpana's Warriors* as one had to stop somewhere. To include more would have served as a distraction. As the viewer walks in, different doors lead to different directions," says Puri.

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The exhibition also features a parallel narrative of vignettes from his life—models created by his niece, Sofia Karim, of the layout of Keraniganj jail, where he spent 101 days, and images of Alam at protests, taken by his students and fellow photographers, such as Tanzim Waha, Munem Wasif and Taslima Akhter. "This became a way of accessing the work of other photographers as well. I still remember, when he came out of prison, he held the Chobi Mela in an unfinished building in that crowded metropolis. There is an image of that. The kind of support he gets worldwide is incredible," says Puri.

In this parallel narrative, Ahmad's voice is important. When Alam was in prison, she formed a WhatsApp group of friends to provide regular updates on his condition. "He was working towards the Chobi Mela and didn't know whether he would be present for that or remain behind bars. He was also planning for the exhibition at Rubin Museum, New York. He would talk to Rahnuma, who would then inform us in the group," says Puri.

She became interested in this encapsulation of Alam's daily routine in 10-12 sentences. Ahmad has continued updating the group. "It is an incredible insight from the person living with him. When he was covid-positive, she would message about how was coping while also working on his archive. The publication on the exhibition will include Rahnuma's messages, besides essays from people who know him, to offer different perspectives on his life," she adds.

*Singed But Not Burnt* can be viewed at Emami Art, Kolkata from 19 June-20 August, 11am-6pm (Tuesday-Sunday).