



Photographer, writer, and human rights activist Shahidul Alam has been a long-time campaigner for social justice and has also challenged the global dominance of white western media. Alam's resistance has been through his art and his activism, but also through the institutions he has built. This has often led to confrontation with the powerful elite of his native Bangladesh.

Over the last three decades, he has had a loaded gun pointed at his head and been stabbed eight times. On 5th August 2018, after a critical interview on Al Jazeera, he was picked up by Bangladeshi security forces, blindfolded, handcuffed, and tortured, and eventually spent 107 days in incarceration. After a global campaign for his release by over a dozen Nobel laureates and world personalities, he was released on bail but still faces up to 14 years of imprisonment if convicted. He continues to resist.

We Shall Defy draws on a poem by indigenous writer Kabita Chakma in Pahari language, translated by Alam for an exhibit he had put together on the disappearance by the Bangladesh military of the indigenous leader Kalpana Chakma. To expand the poem's narrative, Alam integrates the ancient form Bangla art, *Patachitara* (pictorial cloth scrolls), with photographs from over 14 artists and activists.

Through images and text by Alam, illustrations and shlok (verse) in Bangla by Amal Akash, sketched descriptions of Alam's life in jail by Sofia Karim, and a timeline by Naeem Mohaiemen and his team, the show maps out the turbulent path that Alam and his team have navigated in their struggle to attain social justice.

INTERVIEW WITH SHAHIDUL ALAM ON *WE SHALL DEFY*

In your work, you typically use photography as a medium for social justice. What have you exposed through photography which would have been difficult or impossible to bring to light in another form?

Despite the talk about fake news and use of Photoshop, photography does still suggest that the author was there when the photo was taken. A primary witness. This is true both for still and moving images. The stillness of a photograph provides the added ability to read incredible detail at a pace of one's choosing. Together, this sets the medium apart from other forms of art, including other visual arts and even the moving image.

The implicit veracity of the photograph has maximum impact when recording moments in time that take on a historical significance.

Things that go beyond the 5Ws and the H that journalism relies upon, juxtaposition, body language, the furtive glance, the eye contact, allow the reading of a situation that can transcend other interpretations.

I have been able to use this most when observing what happens behind the scenes in major historical moments. My ongoing personal work on the "Struggle for Democracy" shows not only the iconic moments in a major historical event, but also the chemistry of the sometimes-subtle interactions as events played out. It shows the power relationships and the informal dynamics in political movements, which provides a much more nuanced reading of a complex phenomenon.

Your exhibition *We Shall Defy* integrates your work with over a dozen other artists, illustrators, and photographers to create a uniquely collaborative exhibition. How does



the work of these artists connect with your mission and what brought you to this section?

Some of the collaboration in the show is with specific entities I have been involved in shaping, such as the work by my former students in the Pathshala school of photography, and photographers in the Majority World Agency. Both of these organizations have played a major role in challenging the hierarchy within global photography, in questioning western dominance and in building a more pluralistic media environment. The absence of photography, deliberately ensured by a repressive regime to suppress its brutality, requires new modalities of representation and Sofia Karim turns to memory as a tool to overcome this barrier. Naeem Mohaiemen and his team connect the dots between the entities I have created and the prevailing media environment,

while linking it with major global turning points. The illustrations of Amal Akash draw upon indigenous forms of storytelling, reminding us of the traditional forms that still exist. Collectively, they link the global with the local, combine analogue with digital and the performative with more static forms of artistic representation. Together they question the huge asymmetry of power in class, race and gender, both within my country and globally.

In *We Shall Defy*, you produce a series of texts to accompany the photography and multi-media work. How can photography, at times be a limited form? How do these various methods support each other in the exhibition?

I am a storyteller, and I use whatever form is most effective in getting my message across. There are times when photographs are most effective and others where text holds sway. Often, they complement one another. I am not married to any particular medium, and if some day photography ceases to be an effective tool, I'll have no qualms about casting it aside. When words fail, they too shall be abandoned. Within the exhibition, the photographs generally provide the visual reference to the elements of the story while text provides the meta data, providing deeper meaning

and context. Sometimes the text is a standalone, with the photographs providing a parallel strand. I try to play to the strength of each medium, rejoicing in the moments when they fuse to perfection.

How did your abduction in 2018 and subsequent imprisonment affect the production and messaging of your work upon release? Has the purpose of your work changed in any way?

During the 107 days when I was incarcerated there was obviously no scope for photography (except for one instance which is too complicated to recount here), though I took many pictures in my mind. At a later stage, my fellow prisoners did provide me pen and paper, and while I've not been able to access all of my writing, much of it is with me. I drew largely upon my jail experience in my latest book, "The Tide Will Turn." Having seen how the justice and prison systems work up close, I have a new determination in telling the stories of victims of the judicial system. My work on prison reform began while I was in prison and has continued ever since. There are other shifts too, some because of the practicalities of my existence. I used to go round on my bicycle and walk on my own. I am a marked person, so it is unsafe for me to do either any more. Never being able to be on your own, takes some getting used to. On

the other hand, I am now known to many more people than I was before, which brings new expectations and obligations. There was a time when I thought I might not live, so just being alive is a gift I celebrate. The feeling that I must use this life for a meaningful purpose is now that much more intense. I take nothing for granted.

Is there anything you would like to add?

Many of these questions have largely been about me. It is important to remember that I work as part of a collective and it is the cumulative contribution of a large number of people, many of whom have taken huge risks to be on this journey. From the campaign for my release, to handling the legal, financial and medical issues related to my incarceration, to the daily threat of being on the crosshairs of a repressive regime, all require a commitment that is not often recognized. I am the more visible part of this resistance, but its resilience is based on the sacrifices and contributions of many.

Shahidul Alam
Dhaka 30th August 2021
International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances