

# CHOBIVALAS OF BANGLADESH

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Photographers of Bangladesh





## **CHOBIWALAS OF BANGLADESH**

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## Introduction to Photography in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a young country, but its visual art traditions draw upon ancient practices dating back to 450 BCE<sup>1</sup>. The earliest influences drew upon the Maurian arts<sup>2</sup>. The Pala rule (750–1174 CE) and later the Sena rule through the 11th and 12th centuries led to Buddhist, Chinese, Japanese, eastern Asian and Tibetan art influences.<sup>3</sup> Islamic art thrived during Mughal rule, and even colonial influences shaped the emergence of the arts in the subcontinent. Arguably, colonialism might have led to the early adoption of photography in the region as the early colonialists' propensity for documentation and the need to propagate the colonial message required extensive records of the colony. The Bourne and Shepherd studio, set up in 1863, remains the oldest photographic studio in existence<sup>4</sup>.

After the partition of India in 1947, the east wing of Pakistan, which is presently Bangladesh, still retained an affinity for the arts, which to an extent, was less encouraged by the Pakistani state, as art was considered un-Islamic. The influence of modern art right up to 1970's had an impact on subsequent art practice in Bangladesh. The emergence of Bangladesh, based on a secular constitution, provided greater freedom, but it was largely a few individuals, namely Zainul Abedin and his contemporaries of the modern art movement, who provided the basis of much of visual art practices today.

Ironically, despite modernism having been a key influence on Abedin and his contemporaries, what has limited the art movement since, has been a throwback to pictorialism, or the importance to form being given over content, which has suppressed more contemporary tendencies in the visual arts generally. This proclivity towards form has also been the basis of much of early photographic practice in Bangladesh. A further factor delaying the development of photography in the country lay in the non-recognition of photography as an art form, which exists till today. The state sponsored Asian Biennale, in its entry rules, prohibits the submission of photography or video. The Fine Arts Institute, set up by Zainul Abedin, does not have photography in its curriculum. Not a single university in Bangladesh, or Shilpakala Academy, the academy of fine and performing arts currently has a department of photography. As a result, there have been two very divergent photographic practices. Press photographers who have taken a literal approach, seeing themselves more as illustrators than either artists or interpretive journalists. Salon photographers on the other hand, have tried to prove their artistic status, whole heartedly embracing pictorialism. Form has triumphed over content. As a result, neither group informed the other, nor experimentation was limited to techniques of production, rather than an exploration of ideas. This also led to a rift between the two groups where press photographers actively rejected any other form of photography.

1 MM Hoque and SS MostafizurRahman, Wari-Bateshwar, Banglapedia: The National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dhaka, Retrieved: 2013-01-1

2 Mauryan Empire was a geographically extensive Iron Agehistorical power in ancient India, ruled by the Maurya dynasty from 322–185 BCE.

3 French, JC (1928), *The art of the Pal Empire of Bengal*, Oxford University Press.

4 Macmillan Biographical Encyclopedia of Photographic Artists & Innovators, by Turner Browne, Elaine Partnow, Published by Macmillan, 1983. ISBN 0-02-517500-9. Page 70.

Commercial photography on the other hand was restricted to photographic studios, most of which had earlier been run by photographers from West Pakistan. These studios had fine technique, and had excelled in the art of lighting, printing and retouching, but rarely ventured outside the studio portrait. Documentary photography, or story telling through photographs was completely absent as was the form of the extended photo essay.

The Bangladesh Photographic Society (BPS) led by the dedicated and talented teacher Manzoor Alam Beg<sup>5</sup> played a pivotal role in organising the salon photographers. With limited facilities and minimum funds, it still managed to herd the wide and non-cohesive group of photographers not directly related to the press. Through monthly meetings and contests and regular annual events and outings, it created a vibrant photographic community, which was the springboard for the majority of the photographers who later branched out into documentary practice and even the early experimenters.

Bijon Sarker, the first registered member of the society, who had an exhibition of experimental photography (largely photograms) in 1965 teamed up with other practitioners of that time, Anwar Hossain (documentary), Golam Mustafa (video), SS Barua (nature and bird photography) and along with Mr. Beg were amongst the photographers who played an active role in nurturing younger enthusiasts.

The liberation war in 1971 had been a turning point. Even prior to independence, Rashid Talukder's nose for a picture and his journalistic instinct ensured that he was at the right place at the right time through out Bangladesh's turbulent history. Having had no formal education in photography, Talukder was freed of the compositional binds that many contemporary image makers were trapped within. The 2 ¼ square had its own aesthetic, but Talukder and other photojournalists used the balanced frame to capture some of the most disturbing powerful images of the 20th century.



*Golam Kashem Daddy (1894-1998) one of the earliest Bengali photo practitioner at his home in Indira Road, Dhaka*

<sup>5</sup>Later given the title Alokchitracharya (Chancellor of Photography)

The recent split from Pakistan meant that the established studios like Zaidi's had gone. But the war of liberation changed the Bangladeshi psyche. 1947, while of immense significance to South Asia, meant little to Bangladeshis. History books barely touched upon it. There were few references to it in literature. 1971 on the other hand was a lived experience. Unsurprisingly therefore, apart from the early photographs of Golam Kasem Daddy, dating back to 1918, there are few early photographs from Bangladesh. There followed a romantic period where photographers like Amanul Haque and Naibuddin Ahmed produced stylised landscapes and carefully set up idyllic images of people. Nawazesh Ahmed and later Anwar Hossain, began to adopt a more contemporary feel to their images. Bijon Sarker and Manzoor Alam Beg, combined elements of classical pictorialism with the curiosity of the experimentalist. Sayeda Khanam was the lone woman of that era, doggedly pursuing an almost entirely male profession.

The BPS was a vibrant space. Young photographers with their first black and white prints would mingle with the likes of Rashid Talukder (the only press photographer in the group) and Anwar Hossain. The ever young Dr. Ansaruddin Ahmed would hand out his pristine prints. The crowd would wait in expectant silence for the results of the monthly photo contest. The monthly photographic newsletter of BPS (Bangladesh Photography Society), then without pictures, would be distributed. Invariably, there would be a speech or two. It was a camera club, trade union and a hangout joint, all rolled into one.

The early work of Golam Kasem and the establishment of the Camera Recreation Club had a distinct influence. Manzoor Alam Beg's steadfast role as a mentor and an organiser, held the community together for many years. The Ahmed brothers brought out the first book on photography, and Nawazesh Ahmed, an agronomist with a PhD, brought respectability to the medium and at least for him, an acceptance within academia. Anwar Hossain was the enfant terrible who brought immediate attention through his arresting images, his controversial statements, and his maverick lifestyle. Sadly he too lost the edge that was his hallmark and had largely retired into oblivion, only to emerge recently reinventing himself as a teacher and picking up on his early cinematographic expertise. Hasan Saifuddin Chandan and the string of fine photographers who produced evocative images in the early nineties, also lost their way, though the Map Agency, set up by H S Chandan, Mahmud, S A Kiron and a few other talented photographers continues and has made a valuable contribution.

Shahidul Alam, a self-taught photographer, returned from the UK in 1984 was quickly pulled into the BPS by Manzoor Alam Beg. Alam brought new energy into the society, setting up the first photographic gallery in the country and establishing a library and darkroom in the society premises. He also set up the first photo school, the Bangladesh Photographic Institute (BPI), the education wing of the society.

The BPS newsletter was a monthly magazine that had been running regularly since the inception of the society in the mid-seventies. It was a low cost newsletter, printed on letterpress on newsprint and had no photographs. Alam appointed Anwar Hossain as the editor of the magazine, used bicolour printing on art paper for the cover, and changed to offset printing. The first photo magazine was born.



There were also non-photographers who also played an important role. Brigadier Atiqur Rahman, a keen amateur, compiled the first history of Bangladeshi photography in a seminal paper titled 'The Development of Photography in Bangladesh'. But it was still the salon era. Mohammad Ali Salim, Kazi Mizanur Rahman, Kashi Nath Nandy, Abdul Malek Babul, Debabrata Chowdhury were all fine photographers, but their arena was the camera club contest. The rule of thirds, the well-placed diagonal, the balanced image, was what everyone was making. They entered contests, won prizes, vied for medals and certificates. This was a world in itself. The Bangladesh Photographic Society became the launch pad for the contest winning photographers. The stickers at the back of the prints were often more important than the images themselves. The society newsletter proudly boasted of salon acceptances. Strategies for winning contests were hotly debated at the monthly meetings. Stardom was based on number of medals and not on quality of content. Pretty pictures still ruled.

Alam had taken up photography because of its transformative power, and began to introduce documentary photography. Using his international connections to bring in trainers from Europe, he initiated a series of workshops on storytelling through photographs and documentary practice. As a jury member in the Commonwealth Photography Contest, he also organised a local contest through the British Council in Dhaka and rather than providing cash prizes, gave high quality paper and chemicals to the winners, which raised the benchmark for photographic printing. Anwar Hossain went on to win the Special Merit Award at the prestigious contest. While there were many photographers who did well in salon contests organised by entities like Fédération Internationale de l'Art Photographique (FIAP), the Commonwealth contest was a step outside the salon circuit. A new world was opening up for Bangladeshi photographers. Hasan Saifuddin Chandan, through his ground breaking work on the Kamlapur Railway Station, created a new direction. Documentary photography was taking roots in Bangladesh.

Most photographers still found it difficult to make a living and the lure of 'bidesh' (foreign lands) was too much for many to withstand. Several of the young photographers who were making the transition away from salon photography, decided to try their luck overseas. Years later, not one of them has been successful in establishing a career in photography. Nasir Ali Mamun was an exception in some ways. Portraiture had always been his forte. Unlike most of the migrants from the developing countries he drove taxis, worked in petrol stations, or worked in low paid jobs, Nasir continued to produce portraits of people he admired. Ginsberg, Gunter Grass and many others filled his album. While unsuccessful commercially, he was able to expand his photographic repertoire and eventually, when he decided to leave the others behind and return to his native land, he was able to establish himself as THE portrait photographer of the era. Fine portraits adorned the newspaper he worked for, and while the post was largely ornamental, he was made the first picture editor of a national daily newspaper.

### **Bangladesh in international media through photographs: the story so far**

Bangladesh's presence in international media had begun with the reporting of the war of liberation in 1971. Talukder's dismembered head of a slain intellectual, framed by bricks and their sharp shadows, being one of the most powerful images of the 20th century. Talukder, Mohammad Shafi, Jalaluddin Haider, Aftab Ahmed and Abdul Hamid Rayhan



© Rashid Talukder

*A decapitated head in a Rayer Bazaar brick field, where pro-liberation intellectuals were murdered by the Pakistan Army. December 16, 1971*

were amongst the press photographers who documented some of the everyday events of 1971. Talukder's picture of the bayoneting of Biharis, had been hidden from public sight until Drik Picture Library published it in 1993. Kader Siddiqui, the man responsible for the killings, was too powerful a man to antagonise, and until then, no publication had been prepared to take the risk. A similar frame by Michel Laurent, had meanwhile won a Pulitzer. Talukder's dismembered head too, had been passed by the authors of the Century Book. Others had recorded 1971 in their own way. Taking great risks as amateurs, preserving a history of our birth pangs, knowing it could signal death.

Some of the finest photojournalists in the world had been in Bangladesh in 1971, Marc Riboud, Don McCullen, David Burnett, Raghu Rai, Raymond Depardon, Mary Ellen Mark, Marilyn Silverstone, Abbas had all produced powerful images of the genocide. Henry Kissinger had famously dubbed Bangladesh, "The Basket Case" <sup>6</sup>. Many foreign photojournalists followed, but all of them regurgitated the stereotypes. Poverty, Famine and disaster remained the sole representation of Bangladesh in international media. Alam felt the story had to change to a more realistic representation of his people. He realised that the perception of his nation depended upon who controlled the narrative. Having worked with international agencies, he felt a photo agency made up of Bangladeshi photographers could tell a different story. After three terms as president of the BPS, he

<sup>6</sup> There is dispute over who actually made the remark: Secret Minutes Dispute Kissinger, Jan 3, 1972; Kissinger: I Am Getting Hell...From the President, Jan 5, 1972; Nixon's One Man State Department, Jan 7, 1972

stepped down and set up Drik, the first picture library in the country.

This was also the time when Bangladesh was in the grip of military rule. The movement against General Ershad changed all that. Resistance had been building, and the iconic image of Noor Hossain, with 'Let Democracy be Freed' painted on his back, was a turning point. In 1971, the photographs were taken surreptitiously, under fear of death. In the new movement, the photographers were in the fore. They were the witnesses of the people and empowered by people's will. Ershad clamped down on the media, enforcing censorship. The media responded en-masse, stopping publication in protest, but the photographers continued to work, and when the general fell, and an impromptu exhibition was organized of pictures of the movement, the queue outside Zainul Gallery was nearly a mile long. There were near riots as people stormed the gallery to get a glimpse of their hard earned victory.

While photojournalists had recorded street life and political strife, and a few photographers had addressed poverty, there was no culture of documentary practice and person-al projects. Photography was still seen as an illustration, meant to fit in with a predetermined caption.

The struggle for democracy had an obvious impact on the photographic movement and the 1989 was a significant year. 150 years after the birth of photography, the region's first photo library, Drik and the Bangladesh Photographic Institute were setup. After sustained lobbying by the photographers, a bill was passed in parliament for a department of photography to be formed in Shilpakala Academy, though still today it has not been implemented. The workshops at the Bangladesh Photographic Institute and at Drik showed there was another way of working and that photography had more to offer than simply producing pretty images or winning awards. Photography was also trying to move away from the shadows of painters who still ruled supreme. The success of a photograph had always depended on how well it resembled a painting. The medium began to find its own identity, and while photography was still not considered art, photographers were now not so concerned about the label. So photographers found their own solutions. They did what other artists and media professionals had failed to do. They aggregated, and made up for lack of external support by supporting each other. A revolution was in the making. Bangladeshi photographers were going to be their own story-tellers. The international representation of Bangladesh was about to change.

## Photography versus the other artistic discipline: status of photography



*World Press Photo exhibition opening at Drik Gallery in Dhaka, 1998*

Drik continued to look for cracks in the system, which would allow photography to flourish. It started with introducing young photographers to festivals like the Visa Pour La Image in Arles in France and bringing photographers with diverse photographic styles, such as Martin Parr, Polly Hope and Roshini Kempadoo as well as related industry professionals such as Stephen Mayes, who brought in important insights into the fine art and commercial marketplace. However, it was largely through the setting up of its education wing Pathshala that the real transformation began to take place.

Alam had joined the international jury of World Press Photo (WPP) and was able to bring the prestigious show to Bangladesh for the first time in 1993. It was followed by the first international seminar on photography. He was also able to nominate Bangladeshi photographers for the Joop Swart Masterclass as well as youngsters for the child jury. He successfully lobbied for Bangladesh to be included in their three-year seminar programme, along with Bosnia Herzegovina, Peru and Zimbabwe. Taking advantage of the WPP (World Press Photo) presence, he set up the school of photography Pathshala taking on some of the most promising young photographers as his first students. This was watershed in Bangladeshi photography.

The initial tendency in Pathshala was to emulate the successful role models like Shahidul Alam and Anwar Hossain and indeed the early successes of Pathshala involved traditional black and white photography in the Magnum style that Alam and Hossain had become known for. Abir Abdullah, a first batch student of Pathshala, worked as a fixer for the Contact Press Photo photographer Lori Grinker and established his own take on the war veterans of Bangladesh. Sameera Haque, combined text with imagery for her own interpretation on the war of liberations, but this time looking at women freedom fighters. Both were featured in the book "Blink" by Phaidon listing 100 of the world's most interesting emerging photographers. Pathshala however, consciously took on photographers with wildly ranging styles and approaches to photography, while Alam insisted on students engaging in critical thinking. Visual anthropology and the politics or representation were part of the curriculum. Alam's own landmark essay, "The Visual Representation of Developing countries by Developmental Agencies and Western Media" led the students into questioning both the language and practice of photography. Several fine photographers emerged from that early group. Abir Abdullah, GMB Akash, Saiful Huq Omi, Munem Wasif, Khaled Hasan and other emerging photographers, all photojournalists of exceptional talent, made the world sit up. Pathshala was by no means the only player. Shafiqul Alam Kiron's winning entry on women victims of acid attacks was the first Bangladeshi entry in World Press Photo to win an award. Since then, Shoeb Faruquee, has also been a winner as well as the Pathshala alumni Andrew Biraj, Taslima Akhter, Rahul Talukder and Sarker Protick. The Joop Swart Masterclass however has been dominated by Pathshala with GMB Akash, Saiful Huq Omi, Andrew Biraj, Munem Wasif and Sarker Protick all making it to the prestigious event. Abir Abdullah and Munem Wasif have also joined Alam in being selected for the prestigious World Press Jury, while Alam has also chaired the event.



© World Press Archive

*Pathshala Alumnus and Faculty Sarker Protick, in the Award Days of World Press Photo contest, 2015, Amsterdam*

After a failed attempt in 1995, Drik again had a go at setting up a photo festival. Since taking Bangladeshi students to global festivals was not an option, bringing the world to Bangladesh had to be the answer. Recognising the nation's interest in the war of liberation, Alam teamed up with the President of Contact Press Images, Robert Pledge to put together an exhibition of largely unseen photographs by many of the great photographers who had been to Bangladesh in 1971. While there was such strong public interest in the show, the government attempted to censor the show, leading to Drik pulling the show from the planned venue, the national museum to Drik's own gallery. It was the first of several controversial exhibitions that Drik would stage. The festival, Chobi Mela was a huge success. Alam also began a regular programme on national television, introducing photography to the general public. The festival also had long term influences. A diverse range of photographers kept flowing in from across the globe and Chobi Mela made it a point to create space for ground-breaking work, deliberately shifting from documentary and news photographs to include conceptual and fine art practice. Students from Pathshala were the first to benefit. Sayeda Farhana, Sanjida Shaheed and a few other photographers, mostly women, began to explore the edges of contemporary photography, using their training as social scientists, fine artists, and in other areas of learning to inject into photography, a tertiary value which the more straight laced, mainstream photographers had failed to achieve.





*Exhibition installation at Shilpakala Academy in Dhaka, before the opening of Chobi Mela VIII, 2015*

Chobi Mela also provided curatorial opportunities for photographers, and the opportunity to mix with peers not only from Western Europe and North America, but also the wider photographic fraternity in Africa, Latin America, The Middle East and other parts of Asia, who gravitated towards Bangladesh. Along with this shift in demography came a shift in creative practice.

Pathshala students were not to be left behind. Another development in the art scene played a role. The fine arts scene in Bangladesh had largely become stagnant, with the established masters content to clone themselves and most of the rest staying within their comfort zones. A young couple, Rajeeb and Nadia Samdani, set up the Dhaka Art Summit, with a focus on contemporary art. Refreshingly, Rajeeb and Nadia were well travelled and open to new influences. They were also prepared to take risks. In the first Dhaka Art Summit, a Pathshala student won the grand prize with his photography. The art community was in uproar. That they had been upstaged by a photographer was difficult for them to swallow. The Samdanis stood their ground and even began to purchase photographic prints for their collection. Another art group, the Britto Trust, also bucked the trend. Friends with many of the Pathshala alumni, they included photography in their art portfolio and ran workshops where both photographers and other artists participated. Their participation in the Venice biennale with photography and video based artwork shook the Bangladeshi art scene. Pathshala however, was by no means the only player.

The Dhaka Art Summit (DAS) has played a major role in shaking up the art scene in Bangladesh. With an emphasis on contemporary arts, DAS brought in leading experts from all across the globe who were quick to recognise the abundant photographic talent in the country. Khaled Hasan, a Pathshala alumnus won the Samdani Artist Development Award in the first DAS which was held in the year 2012, and another Pathshala alumnus Rasel Chowdhury won it in the third DAS in the year 2016. Munem Wasif and Shumon Ahmed are other well recognised alumni who have been highlighted in the summit.



© Sarker Protick

*A visitor looking at the installation work of Pathshala Alumnus and Faculty Sarker Protick, during his exhibition at Dhaka Art Summit, 2014*

Daniel Baumann writes about the works by shortlisted artists for Samdani Art Award: "What made me think that something was going on here? " First of all the quality of works by these twenty artists... The artists obviously knew the language of art (thanks to education and the Internet), but they firmly and proudly applied it to their current context. This was best visible for the numerous photographic positions, many of them coming out of the Pathshala South Asian Media Institute.

Alam himself was exploring other vocabularies and his intensely political work, blended in well with the new languages he was seeking out. The 'Crossfire' show, while closed down by the government received global acclaim, making its way to major museums such as the Tate Modern, and his most recent work on the abduction of an indigenous activist Kalpana Chakma using laser etchings on straw, has opened up new possibilities for photographic expression.

In 2010, Alam curated the Bangladeshi chapter of the show 'Where Three Dreams Cross' at the Whitechapel Gallery in the UK and the Winterthur Gallery in Switzerland. Pathshala fine artist Shumon Ahmed was one of the featured artists. Other Pathshala students, mainly women, like Momena Jalil and more recently, Shahria Sharmin and Jannatul Mawa, have also looked at other modes of expression and engagement. Jannatul Mawa's look at class structures remains one of the few bodies of work that have investigated the phenomenon.





© Jannatul Mawa

*Pathshala Alumnus and Faculty Jannatul Mawa's image from her photo series 'Close Distance'*

### **Types of photography: Press photography, Documentary photography and more**

Along with the explosion in photographic practice has come the somewhat late realisation of the power of photography. Unlike most other parts of the globe, print media continues to grow in Bangladesh and the demand for photojournalists is on the rise. Government policy that even private newspapers need to follow the minimum wages stipulated for journalists has meant better wages and working conditions for news photographers. Newspapers however have been slow to take on multimedia.

While Drik had set up a virtual picture desk at the leading English Daily, The Daily Star, in the late nineties, not a single newspaper in Bangladesh still has a genuine picture desk. Crucial decisions relating to photo-usage still gets taken by the news editor. Newspapers have also been slow to give space to citizen journalists. Hybrid photo news sources, such as Drik News (which was originally set up by students of Pathshala), and its 'Rural Visual Journalism Network (RVJN)' emerged the most successful of the citizen journalism image sources has been 'Focus Bangla', that provides low quality but high volume and low cost photog- raphy. RVJN also provides multimedia content, but while the international agency Deut- sche Welle regularly broadcasts RVJN content, there are few local takers as most newspa- pers are not yet multimedia savvy.



© Shanq Islam

*A local correspondent trained through The Rural Visual Journalism Network (RVJN) programme by Drik, interviewing a woman in a remote village of Bangladesh*



## Professional versus Amateur Photo Communities

Today, the digital photography market inclusive of cameras, lenses, printers and complementary products is an industry valued at more than \$68 billion<sup>7</sup>. Photography services account for several hundred billion more in revenues and the opportunities for providing these services digitally have become big business. This analysis of the digital photography market provides an understanding of the primary products in the market namely cameras and lenses; the products to print digital photographs printers and kiosks; and complementary products closely tied to digital photography inclusive of storage cards, digital photo frames, and photo editing software.

While the price of individual cameras is substantially higher than in the analogue days, the fact that film is no longer needed, an issue both of cost and availability, and the rapidly reducing cost of digital storage, combined with the ability to transmit images online, has made photography much more accessible than in the past. Slick marketing also hides the fact that digital cameras have a much shorter lifetime, becoming obsolete within a few years, a factor not often taken into account when buying equipment. Entry costs for equipment, gears and gadgets are in the price range starting from BDT 25,000 to BDT 1,00,000<sup>8</sup>. Japanese DSLR cameras namely Canon, Nikon, Sony, Fuji, Pentax etc. dominate the market, as opposed to the less expensive products from East Germany and Russia, such as Zenith and Praktica, which were popular before. From the survey it was found that 75% of the amateurs are using smart phones to capture images. Information can be gained easily from the online and from different social media. Today there are thirteen photography schools and eighteen active photography clubs in Bangladesh providing education on photography, though they largely restrict themselves to techniques and aesthetics. The online platform has created opportunity for the photographers to promote their works through these channels. Bangladeshi photographers are developing their own websites, blogs and uploading their photographs in Facebook, Flickr, Instagram, Tumblr etc. There are several online camera clubs that physically meet only at group exhibitions. Some boast memberships of up to 80,000!

More than 200 exhibitions are showcased annually in Dhaka city in various galleries and photography exhibitions are very well attended. In Dhaka there are now more than sixty color labs for printing, fourteen galleries (ten national galleries and four international galleries) as well as eight photography agencies providing a wider platform for photographers.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.marketresearch.com/product/sample-6904389.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Camera Outlets (Flora, JAN Associates, Camera World, Camera Zone)



© Mory Karjunniswut

*International visitors looking around the photo exhibition at Shilpakala Academy in Dhaka during Chobi Mela VIII, 2015*

Digital technology and intelligent cameras have also made it easier to produce competent photographs even with limited skills, there are many photographers out there happy to provide services at low price. The consumption of photography has also vastly increased, and photographers are needed for weddings, fashion shoots, corporate events and by NGOs for their campaigns. The photo culture has also changed. No longer do people make small '3R' prints for family albums. Rather, larger digitally enhanced display prints are the demand of the day.

With old technologies fading, new trends are picking up. The silver halide prints are on the decline, but prints on plain and textured papers are increasing. Analogue darkroom processing machines are being taken over by toner/cartridge-based printing machines. On the same lines, while smartphones killed small amateur cameras, it did fuel the growth of the DSLR. "This means more turnovers for camera manufacturers. Consolidation of smaller retail business into big output centralised manufacturing units is taking place gradually. When digital arrived, the analogue technology took a backseat. Initially, there was a dip in overall business". Now, digital imaging and digital printing are leading the way to new avenues and growth. The industry has accepted the inevitable change.<sup>9</sup>

The photography market in Bangladesh is segmented in two groups: they are Professionals and Amateurs.

The key players in the Bangladesh market in terms of professionals the mostly followed niche:

- Photojournalism
- Documentary Photography
- Fashion Photography
- Development Photography
- Corporate Photography/ Advertising
- Wedding Photography

<sup>9</sup> AIPITA. (All India Photographic Trade & Industry Association)

## Photojournalism

Photojournalists are the news-oriented photographers, the largest categories of employers are print media, TV channels and online news web portals. Together they create a robust platform for photojournalists in Bangladesh. Drik Picture brought the first WPP (World Press Photo) exhibition in 1993 and has worked developing the WPP education programme in Bangladesh. The setting up of Pathshala was designed to coincide with the first yearly workshops. Since then a dramatic shift in the quality of photojournalism took place.

Print media contains hundreds of weekly publications, presenting a vast array of visuals in Bangladesh. Television is the biggest medium for news in Bangladesh and 26 television<sup>10</sup> stations which are currently operating. There are around 54.120 million Internet users<sup>11</sup> in Bangladesh.

The current market of photojournalism is unstable despite the large number of media houses. Poor management has led to the deteriorating condition for photojournalists and they may remain unpaid for up to six months. Currently there are more than three hundred photojournalists of which sixty are actively engaged.

According to government regulations media houses should follow a wage mode system for the photojournalists which are segmented into three categories.

**Category A: BDT 60,000 to BDT 80,000 (Chief Photojournalists)**

**Category B: BDT 25,000 to BDT 40,000 (Senior Photojournalists)**

**Category C: BDT 15,000 to BDT 22,000 (Junior Photojournalists)<sup>12</sup>**

70% of the photojournalists are not in the earliest times qualified. Most of them have worked as assistants of the chief photojournalist. While this was adequate for some of the great photojournalists like Rashid Talukder, it is inadequate in the current market, where a photojournalist is required to have a much wider range of skills, particularly in reporting. Computer literacy is also essential.

There are several successful photojournalists working nationally and internationally, such as Abdullah in EPA, AM Ahad in AP, Moniruzzaman Munir in AFP, Rajib Dhar in Dhaka-Tribune, Sayed Zakir Hossain in Dhaka Tribune and Suvra Kanti Das in Zuma Press. Jewel Samad is currently part of the exclusive travel pool of US President Barack Obama.

<sup>10</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Bangladeshi\\_television\\_and\\_radio\\_channels#Privately\\_owned\\_television\\_stations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Bangladeshi_television_and_radio_channels#Privately_owned_television_stations)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.btrc.gov.bd/content/internet-subscribers-bangladesh-december-2015>

<sup>12</sup> Interview taken from photojournalist Suvra Kanti Das and Monirul Alam

## Documentary Photography

Shafiqul Alam Kiron a well-known photographer, who works in Map Photo Agency, feels the work of Bangladeshi documentary photographers are creating an important place in the globe to represent Bangladesh. He mentions many of the more recent entries such as Din Mohammad Shibly, Munem Wasif, Sarker Protick, Rahul Talukder and Taslima Akhter. However, Bangladeshi documentary photographers depend on the international market to sustain themselves as there is not enough paid work within the country to support local photographers. As such, many young photographers are not interested to pursuing documentary photography as it is financially difficult and a lot of time is needed to produce a good body of work publishing opportunities are also few.



© Munem Wasif

*Pathshala Alumnus and Faculty Munem Wasif's image from his photo story 'Salt Water Tears'*

## Fashion Photography

Between 2008 and 2012, in the neighboring country India the fashion industry is expected to grow 178%, and reach USD 189 Million by 2015. The growth of the Indian fashion industry is highlighted by the increase in the number of large fashion events. The Industry growth in India is mainly driven by the growing exposure of domestic designers at international forums, but growth is also supported by other factors such as the launch of focused business education courses for emerging designers and the establishment of an industry association.<sup>13</sup>

In Bangladesh Fashion photography has gone through some positive changes in the past few years. The glamour aspect of the industry obviously attracts the beginner. However, they often fail due to lack of professionalism. A lack of knowledge on art and literature and awareness of global trends makes it difficult for young photographers to progress in this field. Fashion magazines, fashion houses or industries are reluctant to hire beginners, hence it is always challenging for the new comer. The European glamour industry is not a particularly useful point of reference, in this case, due to cultural differences.



© Jashim Shaikh

*Hadi Uddin, a Fashion photographer and a Pathshala Alumnus during a photo shoot for a fashion magazine in Dhaka*

<sup>13</sup> Global Fashion Industry Growth Research paper



## Development Photography

In Bangladesh there were a total of 2447 NGOs<sup>14</sup>. The NGO sector is segmented in various integrals: Empowerment for women, Pre-primary education, Health Care, Sanitary, Human Rights, Micro Finance, ICT, Food and Nutrition and many more.

Fundraising, reporting and campaigns all require extensive use of photography and every year NGOs' produce calendars, research papers and annual reports. Some even organise exhibitions and produce books. They use stock photographs and also commission work through in house photographers, but also hire external photographers and visual communication specialists to meet their requirements.

In the past, western photographers would be brought in to do the photography for NGOs. Reductions in budgets and some awareness of cultural sensitivity have meant that local photographers are now more in demand. Local photographers are also able to follow ongoing stories and have greater access to local communities.



© Tanvir Murad Topu (for UNICEF)

*A woman bringing drinking water from a distant place due to excessive salinity in water at her village in Barguna District, Bangladesh*

Photographers are particularly in demand during disasters, as much for reporting as for fundraising requirements. Child sponsorship programmes also rely on photography, though in these cases the need for high quality image is not so great, and photos by in house staffs are often used randomly.

Day rates for NGO photography normally ranges from BDT 10,000 per day to over BDT 20,000 per day, though top photographers may still be hired for over BDT 50,000 per day. It is common for NGOs to demand they own the copyright of the photographs taken, though this is in clear violation of the Berne Convention and Bangladesh copyright law. This appears to be selectively applied and top photographers and international photographers retain their copyright. Agencies such as Drik have consistently resisted this and have successfully campaigned to have such illegal practices amended.

<sup>14</sup> <http://ngoab.portal.gov.bd/>



## Corporate Photography / Advertising

Advertising agencies have been the first to recognise the power of photography and have used it extensively for propaganda, marketing and sales. As such, the corporate sector has been the biggest spender on photography. This has ranged from big budget brand campaigns to merchandising promotion and interior design. Annual reports, brochures and general advertising as well as PR campaigns have extensively used photography. Subliminal advertising, illegal in some countries, but blatantly ignored in countries like Bangladesh, also target young children, pregnant mothers and the textually illiterate to create demands for products not normally needed. This sector is also the most misogynistic, blatantly producing sexist imagery. Sadly there is very little adherence to ethical standards, and the absence of a strong consumer association has led to racist advertising being produced as well as imagery that is derogatory to the subaltern.

On the other hand, this is a very well paid sector, and photographers face an ethical dilemma, when material needs have to be balanced with moral issues. It is also the sector which requires the highest level of technical skills, and considerable investment in high-end equipment. As such industrial, advertising and corporate photography is an extremely lucrative sector and caters mostly for selected high profile photographers. There is also considerable corruption in this sector, where allegations of paybacks, and demands for sexual services have been made.



© Tanvir Murad. Topu (for HSBC)



*Multinational banks and companies are hiring local Bangladeshi photographers to cover their events*

In the west, even agencies well known for their concerned photography, such as Magnum, only obtain 7% of their revenue from editorial stock. A significant part of their earnings now comes from corporate photography. Not too many Bangladeshi photojournalists or documentary photographers have developed the skill sets necessary for working in this sector. A certain amount of business acumen is also needed, which most photojournalists and documentary photographers have not mastered. As such a large bulk of the work in this sector is done by a handful of professionals. Even international photographers have set up shop in Bangladesh and have cornered the market in the absence of genuine competition.

Corporate photography is also often controlled by the head office of multinational companies and deals made at global levels leads to international contracts which often bypass local photographers. On the other hand, top Bangladeshi photographers are now also commissioned to do corporate assignments internationally. A typical day rate for a top corporate Bangladeshi photographer would range from USD 800 – USD 1,200, plus expenses.

### Wedding Photography

In Bangladesh wedding photography companies hire the most talented photographers and look for ambitious people who want to advance themselves in their career says fashion photographer Abu Naser. Yearly fairs solely on wedding photography are also held in Dhaka, implying how important this sector has become in this country. There used to be a stigma associated with wedding photography, but today many young photographers are interested. There is even a celebrity factor inside today and whom one hires for one's wedding photography provides a status.

There are now several wedding photography agencies in Bangladesh such as: Wedding Dairy, Wedding story, Dream Weaver, Chocolight etc. Among them Wedding Diary has played a bigger role in nurturing wedding photographers as it offers various courses and workshops on wedding photography. Early competitions are organised by entities like Wedding and Portrait Photographers of Bangladesh (WPPB). A conference on wedding photography was also conducted in October 2015 aligning with the Professional Photographers Asia Community.



© Ashraful Awal Mishuk

*Bride and Groom posing to a photographer in a wedding reception at Dhaka, Bangladesh*

## **Amateur Photography**

There is a segment of young photographers who have taken this job seriously, signing up for trainings and workshops and receiving prestigious awards for their work. Another chunk seem to focus on simply earning quick money, or promoting themselves among 'Friends' in Facebook- with no regard to the dedication and know-how this art form requires. All of them together make the photography industry, and they have all contributed- whether in a large scale or small, whether in a positive way or detrimental- to the fervour this market has seen.

While camera manufacturers promote and idolise celebrity photographers and top professionals, the bulk of their income is derived from the consumer sector. As such amateur photographers are an important segment of the industry.

Photography competitions are arranged to boost the motivation and influence of the young potential photographers such as the Sony Photo Contest, Nikon Photo Contest, and Pentax Eminence Photo Contest etc.

Most of today's young and some of the more famous photographers are primarily interested in nature and in pictorial photography. Techniques, especially digital manipulation, macro photography and special effects are particularly popularly with amateurs. The rise in overall standards of photography has seen a parallel rise in amateur standards. Drik recently published a book 'Bangladesh, seen from within' which is a compilation of work by Bangladeshi amateur photographers.

## **Funding for Photography**

While there are now a number of photo contests where winners can get sizeable prize money, there is little available in the way of funding for photography. There are no government grants or scholarships offered in this field. Individual scholarships, through the Sam Banks awards, The KM Trust and the Chobi Mela Lifetime Achievement Awards, are provided through Pathshala. The recently introduced Samdani Art Award, Bangladesh's premier art award, promotes Bangladeshi contemporary art. Given the broader view on arts taken by the Samdani Foundation, one of the awards in 2015, went to the Pathshala alumnus Munem Wasif.

Bangladeshi photographers however, have won numerous overseas grants. The first such award was won by Shahidul Alam in 1992 from the Mother Jones Fund for Documentary Photography. More recent awards include the Magnum Foundation grant, the National Geographic All Roads Award, The Alexia Foundation Award, the Open Society Engagement Grant and numerous others.

## **Education and training in Photography**

Several well-known photography institutions operate in Dhaka city where they offer short courses, workshops and artist talks for beginners and aspiring professionals. Some also offer longer courses.

The institutions providing photographic training are: Alliance Française, Bangladesh Photography Society (BPS), Beg Art Institute of Photography, Counterfoto, Dhaka University Photography Society (DUPS), Pathshala South Asian Media Institute, and Photo Bank. Many private universities also teach photography at the foundation level as a credit course. They include: University of Liberal Arts, Stamford University, Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology. YouTube and online courses also offer learning opportunities, which were previously absent.

A master's programme was developed between Pathshala, Oslo University College, Dhaka University, Punjab University and College of Mass Communication and Journalism in Nepal, with Pathshala providing the photographic training. However, the programme, was poorly managed and has since folded.

## **Role played by Pathshala South Asian Media Institute**

Pathshala now offers various short-term and long-term photography educational programs including workshops and presentations in photography throughout the year which creates platform for the potential learners. From its modest beginnings Pathshala expanded attracting students from within Bangladesh as well as outside. Over the last seventeen years Pathshala has successfully partnered with national and international organizations and educational institutions to conduct several successful socially responsible programs. Inherent in Pathshala work is this ability to use the power of photography and multimedia to educate, inform and draw powerful emotional responses. Pathshala augments and builds on this strength through a wide network of global and local collaborators. This broader and extended practice of utilising the entire range of visual culture combined with new media has extended its reach and influence. The Institute also offers courses and training programmes to domestic and international clients: individuals, companies, and organisations. The international collaborations are currently with Edith Cowan University, Griffith University, Oslo University College, Bolton University, Gloucester University, Danish School of Photojournalism and Sunderland University UK, while new partnerships are being developed with Germany, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Myanmar and China.

## Photo agencies based in Bangladesh

SL	Photo Agencies
1	Drik News
2	Drik Picture Library limited
3	F8 foto Agency
4	Focus Bangla
5	Image Bank Photo Agency
6	Map Photo Agency
7	Photo Bangla
8	Photobank Gallery
9	RVJN
10	RAW Fotos
11	Society For Nature Photography

Table 1.0

Drik Picture Library, the first photo agency in Bangladesh was setup in 1989. It was soon followed by the agency MAP, which was a collective formed by a group of talented photographers. The agency failed to keep up with advances in digital technology, but did important work, particularly in the development sector. One of the key photographers, Mahmud produced one of the few extended bodies of work on the indigenous community of Bangladesh. Focus Bangla, while not known for the quality of its work, provides low cost high volume photography and has established itself as the leading independent supplier of images for mainstream media.

Drik News, initially set up by alumni of Pathshala to provide opportunities for students, transformed itself into an independent professional source of news photographs. It also formed the Rural Visual Journalism Network by training rural correspondents to produce multimedia feeds using the iPod touch. The correspondents regularly provide 3-5 minute multimedia feeds, which are edited and subtitled in the field using the iPod touch. The feeds are distributed through the online platform of Drik News. Mainstream publications like Deutsche Welle broadcast these feeds weekly. Drik News has however, failed to attract local mainstream media which are not sufficiently multimedia savvy. The RVJN programme has been run in partnership with World Press Photo.

## Major Bangladesh Photographers

Most of the major Bangladeshi photographers have been mentioned throughout this report. One of the drawbacks of the industry is the lack of a database on photographers. This applies particularly to rural photographers whose archives have already been lost and much of their histories forgotten.

The online forums of photography, because of the nature of the digital medium have an organised list of its members. No such list exists for photographers outside these collectives. Several attempts to set up a professional body of photographers eventually flopped, though loose collectives do exist, especially amongst press photographers.

Chobi Mela has conferred lifetime achievement awards to Golam Kasem Daddy, Manzoor Alam Beg, Samsul Alam Almaji, Amanul Huq, Bijon Sarker and Anwar Hossain.

## The photographic community (Directory of organizations)

SL	Studio Names
1	AAkash Photography
2	Altaf Photography
3	Apurba.com
4	Azams Photography
5	Bridal Moment
6	Bridal Protography
7	Chanchal Mahmud Photography
8	Chhaya Banee
9	Eye Click
10	Fotogenic
11	Fotomatik
12	Fotovista
13	Pinhole Studio
14	Raw Fotos

Table 2.0

SL	Gallery Names
1	Alliance Française de Dhaka
2	Asiatic Gallery of Fine Arts
3	Bengal Art Lounge
4	Bengal Centre
5	Bengal Gallery of Fine Arts Bangladesh
6	Cezanne Art Gallery
7	Contemporary Arts Ensemble
8	Divine Art Gallery
9	Drik Gallery
10	Gallery Chitrak
11	Goethe Institute
12	National Art Gallery; Shilpakala Academy
13	National Museum

Table 3.0

<b>SL</b>	<b>Photography Club List</b>
01	AB Photography Club
02	Adamjee Cantonment College Photography Club-ACCPC
03	AIUB Photography Club
05	Asian Photography Club Bangladesh
06	AUST Photography Club
09	AUW Photography Club
10	Bangladesh Natural Photography Club
11	Bangladesh Photography Club
12	BM College Photography Club
13	Brac University Photography Club
14	BUBT Photography CLUB
15	BUPC (Bangladesh University Photography Club)
16	Chandpur Photography Club
17	DJMC Photography Club
18	East West University Photography Club-EWUPC
19	First Light Photography Club-FPC
20	Independent Photography Club(IPC)
21	Lumia Photography Club Bangladesh
22	Muktochokh– Pathshala Photography Society
23	NUBPC-Northern University Photography Club
24	NSUPC-North South University Photography Club
25	Through The Lens(TTL) Photography Club
26	University of Liberal Arts (ULAB Photography Society)

Table 4.o

## **Press Photography associations**

Press photographers have sadly been politicised and there are two major organisations and each is affiliated to one of the two major political parties. The photojournalists Forum is (unofficially) affiliated to the Awami League, whereas the Photojournalists Association is similarly affiliated to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

## **Issues, trends and challenges**

Despite the position of Bangladesh as a world leader in photography, the absence of a department of photography at university level, the non-accredited status of the major photographic institute, Pathshala, and the absence of photography teaching in major art schools, is a cause for concern. The need for visual literacy is also not felt in academic circles.

While Pathshala and other schools such as Counterfoto have been remarkably successful in training photographers, professionalism in related fields has not developed. There are no trained photo editors. Neither are there agents, curators, critics or writers with expertise in photography. It is common for people writing on contemporary art to completely leave out any reference to photography. This archaic mindset also exists among gatekeepers, and poses a genuine threat to both the appreciation and development of the medium.

The absence of proper archival facilities is also a major threat, the archives of photographers like Amanul Haque, Nawazesh Ahmed, Naibuddin Ahmed, Bijon Sarker, Shamsul Alam Almaji and Manzoor Alam Beg and many other important photographers have not been set up. 165,000 negatives of Rashid Talukder are kept with Drik Picture Library, but Drik does not have the resources to appropriately digitise, keyword, index and preserve such high volumes. Some 60,000 glass plates with the Bangladesh Department of Archeology are slowly gathering fungus in an open and humid environment.

The lack of respect and understanding of intellectual property is also a major cause of concern. Blatant plagiarism and infringement of copyright is rampant, with the government itself being a prime perpetrator. Numerous NGOs who commission freelancers have contracts through which they retain copyright, clearly violating the ethical and moral rights of photographers and flouting national and international law. Interestingly, such practice is selective and is not applied to foreign visiting photographers or even local prominent photographers who are aware of their rights, and is essentially a case of exploitation.



Photographic prints are not purchased or collected by major museums or collectors. This however is changing and some corporate houses and a very small number of private collectors are now buying prints. With six of the thirteen artists highlighted in the upcoming Dhaka Art Summit, being photographers, this situation is likely to change in the future.

A weekly programme on the television channel ATN News is nearing its 80th episode. While it was initially sponsored by Fuji Film Company, the programme has gained sufficient popularity for the channel to run it independently. In Desh TV a show titled 'Durpath' was telecast where photography tutorials was conducted by the faculty members of Pathshala. The huge popularity of photo exhibitions and the increased reach and engagement in social media, caused by photography, has attracted mobile phone and telecommunication companies who now actively promote photography. Given the huge growth of smartphone usage, this trend will surely increase and Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Flickr might yet provide the sustenance for photography that governments have failed to provide.

On the other hand, government and corporate propaganda is regularly debunked by citizen journalists prompting the frequent closure of social media at important political junctures. As citizens have done in China, Iran and other environments where censorship is practiced, citizens will find routes around such blocks. Information will flow, and the photograph will have the last word.



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