

Interview with Drik India Director, Suwendu Chatterjee, on his background in photography, Drik's mission and the state of photography in India.

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CC: How did you become interested in photography?

SC: I started my career in chemistry with the dream to teach organic chemistry in a place like UCLA. Chemistry was my only passion. During the mid seventies, I was doing my post-graduate work and intended to write my PhD on 'suicidal enzymes'. Globally, the entire decade of the seventies witnessed movement against human rights violations. In India, radical movements broke out and the student community got involved with the dream to change the system. I became involved in the leftist movement. My mother used to tell me that those dreams of suicidal enzymes led me to another kind of suicidal activity. Perhaps studying organic chemistry helped me to get in touch with the organism of human struggle for existence. For a full decade I was deeply involved with the Naxalite movement, which is also dubbed as the 'Ultra Leftist' movement. Later, I became disillusioned and disenchanted with Naxalite's politics, but credit them for bringing me very close to human beings. It was a turning point in my life. I took up the pen as a journalist, but soon realized that I needed something more than just the pen to bring out the voice of the common people in whatever small way I could. Photography was the immediate choice. That was the initial quest to start a photographic career.

CC: Can you speak about Drik's history, mission and programming?

SC: Fifteen years ago, a small group of people set up a picture agency in the unlikely location of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Named Drik, the Sanskrit word for vision, the agency set out to represent a group of media professionals living in India, but working around the world. In the years that have followed, many others from Asia, Africa and Latin

America have joined the original group. All of them share a common vision; one that sees the world, not as fodder for disaster reporting, but as a vibrant source of human energy, challenging an exploitative global economic system.

Having pioneered the introduction of email into Bangladesh, Drik continues to take the lead in new media, through the launch of the nation's first webzine--Meghbarta, the web portal Orientation, and the country's human rights portal Banglarights, and through its broad band direct satellite link.

Drik's social commitment is central to its work ethos. Drik has a library, darkroom, studio, gallery and publication. The multimedia and Internet departments provide state of the art media products for an international clientele, and also support the network of creative individuals around the world, who challenge western media hegemony. Drik's training programs range from providing education for working class children to training the region's brightest young photojournalists through Pathshala-- South Asian Institute of Photography. Top professionals from Magnum, National Geographic, Time, Contact Press Images and other leading media organizations make up the visiting faculty. The launch of the first festival of photography in Asia, Chobi Mela, and Drik Partnership, a global conglomerate consisting of some of the most innovative organizations in Asia, Africa and Europe, will ensure that underrepresented photographers will have a voice in world media.

CC: How did Drik expand to other countries outside of Bangladesh?

SC: Once I put down the pen and took up the camera, the struggle began. There was the struggle for survival and exis-



Dr. Shahidul Alam the Managing Director of Drik and Principal of South Asian Institute of Photography is taking a class at Drik Gallery. © Abir Abdullah/Drik



Shahidul Alam is with the working class children of Out of Focus. Photography education is going on the street. © Mayeenuddin/Drik



Drik's building
© Abir Abdullah/Drik

tence-- monetarily, physically and of course mentally. I also wanted to really go beyond the surface and explore a subject deeply, which the newspaper did not allow. I moved from one news media house to another and that continued for more than a decade. I realized that photography at least in a country like India is not appreciated as a fine art like painting. The news media uses photographers as illustrators or as instrument to gather evidence. I became frustrated and began the search for an alternative path.

In the mid-nineties, I met Drik's founder, Shahidul Alam, while I was on an assignment in Bangladesh covering the country's 25th year of independence celebration. On my return to India, I found myself busy experimenting and formulating a movement in photography, which would provide photographers with support and funding. My first initiative was to host an exhibition of World Press Photo in Calcutta, which also included an international photographic workshop. Thus Drik India was born. Personally, the regular assignments for national and international magazines or curating a permanent gallery weren't satisfying enough. Alternative thought and practice on photography can only be accomplished through a combined effort of many. And what could better than the expansion of Drik!

CC: How did you become involved with the HIV and the sex worker projects? How has photography been used as an instrument of social change in India?

SC: In 1992, I was assigned by the newspaper (where I used to work) to do an in-depth photo story on the role of sex workers in combating HIV/AIDS. In Calcutta it was the first project on HIV/AIDS and at that time people were unaware of the

disease. The feature editor wanted a negative exposé story, but the irony was that I did not find anything wrong. I took a positive approach and wrote about the empowerment of sex workers in combating HIV/AIDS. The project at that time was known as STD/HIV Intervention Programme (SHIP) and now it is popular as 'Durbar' (the same name as the sex workers' organization) Eventually this project got worldwide recognition. Prior to 1992, I had never visited any red light area in the world. Since then I have been visiting red light areas regularly, documenting their organizations. I found the women to be warm human beings and their assertion exposed many hidden aspects around sexuality, the stigma and the hypocrisy of the society.

This project taught me that HIV/AIDS goes beyond any statistics. It's not just a health issue—but also a social issue. Gradually, I got involved in Durbar to express my solidarity and work closely with them documenting their lives. I developed friendships with a number of sex workers and felt something had to be done for their children. With the idea of the 'Out of Focus' project done by Shahidul in Bangladesh involving working class children and photography (www.drik.net), I also started teaching photography to 65 children of the sex workers in five red light areas in and around Calcutta. The project started long before Zana Brisky (Oscar winner for the film 'Born into Brothels') went there. UNICEF came forward and funded the project and the children's photographs been exhibited in many parts of the world. The project is to ensure children's rights through learning photography. Though after 15 months UNICEF stopped funding, but still the project is going on with the assistance of Drik. UNICEF considers photography as a vocational training, which I find ridiculous. This



Identity is the buzzword in the North Eastern part of the country. The rickshaw pullers of Manipur hide their identity by veiling their faces as they have formal education but have no opportunity to get a proper job. © Suvendu Chatterjee/Drik India



Where God took Manipuri women to dancing. Performance to protest violence against women. © Suvendu Chatterjee/Drik India

itself reveals the state of photography and the level of understanding of the powerful medium in the country. Neither Zana nor mine are the only projects focused on marginalized children, but there are other efforts in different parts of the country.

CC: Can you comment on the state of photography in India right now? What type of work is prevalent? What types of International events occur in India around photography?

SC: Primarily, India is influenced and dominated by news photography. Press photography in the region is not doing badly. More and more photographers from India and Bangladesh are published internationally. For example, Time magazine featured the picture of the Tsunami victim taken by Arko Dutta of Reuters. The image won the World Press Photo of the Year, and also Shohaib Faruquee of Drik won an award this year from World Press Photo. Apart from news photography, there are some serious documentary photographers whose works are aesthetically formalist with social concerns. Due to the unnecessary dominance of western media, these photographers get less international exposure.

In our region documentary photography is also changing its character. Earlier, the most visible and important role of the photograph was as part of a large feature article. The photographer illustrated journalists' stories. The photograph was a witness, a document of evidence. The stories were not true, unless there were photographs to support them. Drik has taken a lead role in changing the image from an object into a medium. Drik has facilitated the process of negotiation where a photograph, photographer, the image and the viewer are all in active participation. Other branches of photography, like fashion, and advertising photography, are very strong and contemporary, earning photographers money and glamour. Areas such as wildlife and sports photography are also popular.

Art photography has not yet become popular, but recently some young photographers have been independently

experimenting with it. India very seldom shows international art photography exhibits. Drik India with the help of Drik Bangladesh organizes some international workshops and photography exhibitions. In that sense Bangladeshis are fortunate to experience international activities. Apart from regular workshops and exhibitions Chobi Mela (www.chobimela.org), the biennial International Festival of Photography, is an added attraction.

CC: What is the state of photographic education? Are students formally studying photography? Is it a viable profession?

SC: Not like in the US or other western countries. There are thousands of photographers working across the region, but of many of them lack formal education in photography. There are very few universities, which have photography faculty and offer courses. None offer a photo 'major'. That's the reason we developed, Pathshala, South Asian Institute of Photography. The institute is unique, because we have an excellent infrastructure and an international faculty. Pathshala has produced a number of photographers in the region, who have risen above the present day onslaught of media propaganda and become voices for the voiceless.

CC: What types of cultural exchanges has Drik been involved with? What types of projects do you envision for the future?

SC: Drik has multifaceted activities. We have cultural exchange programs with universities and organizations in Europe mainly in Scandinavian countries. We have the exchange program between Drik and Drik India under the Fredskorpset agency based in Norway. Recently, we have taken a regional initiative to incorporate the neighboring countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan in Drik. We have programs exclusively for women photographers and Shahidul is keen in building a Center for Investigating Journalism. In near future, we can explore the possibility of developing exchange programs with the art departments of some reputed universities.

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Victim of state violence which is very common in the North Eastern part of India

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