Midnight's Third Child

Naeem Mohaiemen

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Midnight's Third Child
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The phrase "midnight's third child" is my more polite translation of a phrase we use in Bangla: *chagol'er tritiyo baccha lafay beshi* (the goat's third child jumps more). It suggests the youngest needs to strive harder for the precious maternal sustenance (milk, love, et al.); it also proposes a clarity of purpose from being the last born. Bangladesh as a nation-state presents a conundrum for theories of nationalism based on the stability of markers of territory, language or religion, since it weaves between all three throughout its history. The country has existed under three signs— "East Bengal" under Mughal and British

India until 1947, "East Pakistan" under United Pakistan until 1971, and "Bangladesh" after the liberation war of 1971. Given these movements, reversals, and renewals, the exact nature and shape of the idea of Bangladesh remains contingent and contested. The work of culture can reinforce essentialist ideas that give succor to hegemonic state mechanisms, or it can choose to challenge majoritarian views, especially vis-a-vis this country's many others. Cultural workers choose either to move closer to power in a courtier role, or to dedicate their lives to being productive antagonists. Some of the people I have written about, and been in conversation with, more frequently take on a role of speaking back to power.

A few years back, I protested on social media a *Le Monde* review of Bangladeshi art ("Les artistes bangladais les plus intéressants sont donc à chercher ailleurs", March 14, 2014). In the midst of an otherwise anodyne article was this assertion: "The most interesting Bangladeshi artists are therefore to be found elsewhere, in London (Runa Islam and Rana Begum) or in New York (Naeem Mohaiemen)."[1] A European newspaper's safari-like "discovery" of Bangladeshi art spaces was accompanied by the idea of the essence of "interesting" only to be found in the diaspora. Such articles can dangerously pit Bangladeshis against each other—suggesting conflicts and hierarchies between diaspora and local, with loop conversations around "authentic" and "real" lurking around the corner. The discussion around this French review ran for a few days on social media, but no one seemed willing to take the step of confronting *Le Monde* in public (although we are not always deferential to the French, as you will see later). There was, and is, an idea of cultural workers as passive recipients of discussions around their work—a concept that Dhali Al Mamoon and Tareque

[1] "Les artistes bangladais les plus intéressants sont donc à chercher ailleurs, à Londres (Runa Islam et Rana Begum) ou à New York (Naeem Mohaiemen)."

Masud did much to dismantle, referred to in the interview that closes this book.

For some time in the 1990s, the dyad of India-Pakistan was of interest to a newly emergent discursive art circuit, primarily based in Asia and especially inside our local hegemon India. Thus, the "discovery" of Bangladesh by a global press appears to be an evolution from that earlier dyad into a more diffuse, but still problematic, attention economy. These flows intersect with my own research, which is about Bangladesh as the third point in the triangle created by two partitions—India and Pakistan in 1947, and then after 1971, East Pakistan reborn as Bangladesh. There are many luminous and productive conversations that can be helmed in the subcontinent, spanning not only India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, but also Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and others. And yet, eight years after that *Le Monde* article, discussions about Bangladeshi artists continue to deploy phrases such as "first ever." The political problem of this language, and its supporting institutions, is that it deploys artists against each other, creating rivalry and competition in a never-ending quest for being the first to land on some uncharted moon. There is a larger structural envelope here that worried me, already, about a decade ago. What this new art discourse is doing, subtly or overtly, is alienating ourselves from our own history by rewriting art movements as *sui generis*—without antecedents.

One characteristic of the local context is that artists, writers, academics, and activists have always taken on multiple roles (curators, editors, programmers, organizers) and worked in temporary and long-term collectives. Among Bangladeshis who have inhabited multiple roles are Shahidul Alam (Drik/Chobi Mela), Ebadur Rahman (Jamini/Depart),

Samari Chakma (Comrade Rupak Chakma Memorial Trust), Mustafa Zaman (Depart), Arifur Rahman Munir (Nokta), Kehkasha Sabah (Kalakendra), Shehzad Chowdhury (Longitude Latitude), Ruxmini Reckvana Choudhury (Samdani Art Foundation/Dhaka Art Summit), Nisar Hossain (Dhaka Art Center), Wakilur Rahman (Dhaka Art Center/Kalakendra), Taslima Akhter (Gana Samhati), Samina Lutfa Nitra (Bot Tola), Arup Rahee (Center for Bangladesh Studies), Mahrukh Mohoiuddin (UPL), Tanzim Wahab (Bengal Foundation/Chobi Mela/Kamra), Mahbubur Rahman / Tayeba Begum Lipi (Britto), Munem Wasif (Chobi Mela/ Kamra), Kamruzzaman Shadhin (Chobir Haat/ Gidree Bawlee), Sadia Rahman (Bengal Art Precinct), Molla Sagar (Saap Ludu), Salauddin Ahmed (Mangalbarer Sabha), Monjur Ahmed (Santaran/Karnafuli Art Triennial), Hironmoy Chanda / Mahbubur Jamal Shamim (Charupith), Saif Ul Haque (Chetona), Dhanamoni Chakma (Hill Artist Group), Sadya Mizan (Uronto), Ashim Halder Sagor (Art Pro), Yuvraj Zahed A. Chowdhury / Shaela Sharmin/ Zihan Karim / Shihab Jahan (Cheragee Pahar), Shawon Akand (Jothashilpa/ Crack), Farida Zaman (Shako), Kabir Ahmed Masum Chisty (Shoni Mongol Adda), Abu Naser Robi (Porapara), Sadia Marium (Kali Collective), Mostafa Sarwar Farooki (Chabial), Nurul Alam Atik (Nree), Zaid Islam (Chobir Haat), Rafiqul Shuvo (OGCJM: Only God Can Judge Me), Nadine Murshid/Awrup Sanyal/ Tibra Ali/Nayma Qayum (Alal o Dulal), Enamul Karim Nirjhar (Jojon), Saydia Gulrukh (Drik/Thotkata), Jyoti Rahman/Rumi Ahmed/Asif Saleh (Drishtipat), Shubho Saha (Back ART), Hana Shams Ahmed (Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission), and Amirul Rajiv (Cox's Bazar Biennale/Dhaka Graam). List-making is an inherently incomplete act, and as we went to press Tanzim Wahab and I kept remembering additional names we had unintentionally omitted. Therefore this list is only

Naeem Mohaiemen is author of *Prisoners of Shothik Itihash* (Kunsthalle Basel, 2014), and editor of *Chittagong Hill Tracts in the Blind Spot of Bangladesh Nationalism* (Drishtipat/Manusher Jonno, 2010), and *System Error: War is a Force that Gives us Meaning* (Silvana, 2007). In Bangladesh, he has exhibited at Chobi Mela, Dhaka Art Summit, Longitude Latitude, Bengal Shilpalay, Dhaka Art Center, Gyantapas Abdur Razzaq Foundation, Gallery Chitrak, Bishaud Bangla, Dhaka University Charukala, Jahangirnagar University, Chittagong Press Club, Bengal Institute for Architecture, BRAC University, ULAB, and Asian University for Women. He is Associate Professor of Visual Arts at Columbia University, New York.

willful in its lack of consistency, systems, and maps. I write about a book, film, or exhibition when it triggers something else I have been thinking of, and then many months or even years pass when I am not writing. Therefore, an urgent framing is to underscore that these essays are not a comprehensive overview of the many conversations within this geography. They drop in and out of movements based on obsession and happenstance, and another writer will produce a completely different set of works, movements, and networks.

One final thing may tie things together—that is to emphasize that all of these texts came about through friendships and mentoring, conversations in private and public, through debates and arguments. As the fate of cultural workers grows ever more precarious, within the petri dish of capital accumulation, we must hold fast to friendships. The logic of the hyper-speed market that has entered many cultural spaces is always to suggest, cajole, and insist that someone, or many, be left behind. We must push back against this toxic idea with all our combined strengths. In the coming years, as openings and rupture come toward us with equal speed, we will need to hold friends, mentors, comrades, and allies close to us. They, above everything else, make these journeys a mixture of joyful exchange and movement building.

Dhanmondi, Dhaka, August 2022

boobook

Chilekothar Shepai
(Sentry in the Attic)

Hegemony:
Same Old
Stories

boobook

Nineteen years after I first watched it, two scenes from Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) have stayed with me. An early sequence, in which a teenager explains her death urges to a bewildered member of the hospital staff: "Obviously, Doctor, you've never been a 13-year-old girl." And the film's closing lines, when the narrator recounts his inability, as a hapless teenage boy, to fend off the group suicide of the Lisbon sisters in a neighbouring house. ("They hadn't heard us calling, still do not hear us calling them from out of those rooms where they went to be alone for all time.")

Watching that film during its opening week, I thought: "I know you"—and then felt a sharp pang of dislocation from myself. Why was I already so familiar with the motifs of American high-school suburbia, though my own childhood imprint was thousands of miles away, in 1980s Bangladesh? If these were supposed to be shared stories, the flows were only in one direction. I haven't yet met a European teenager with a treasured set of memories that include *Amar Chitra Katha* (more than 100 million copies of this comic book series have been sold since the Indian imprint was founded in 1967); cassette tapes of *Bhanu'r Kautuk* (Bhanu's Comedy); or the legendary romantic couple of Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen, who captivated Bangla audiences in the 1960s. Meanwhile, by mistaking the vampires-and-shopping-malls sunlit noir of Stephen King novels as my own story, I had lost part of the city and life I grew up in.

This sense of familiarity comes from the manner in which a set of experiences, and histories, have been normalized as "universal"; when making a work, wherever you may be from, there is an awareness that certain things can appear as elements in your work without requiring explanation or footnotes. I wondered about this freedom from over-explaining when I saw, with pleasure, that Raqs Media Collective

I have been thinking about how the museum gets to a place where the majority world is not a therapeutic addition to what is already overrepresented, but a shared project. Furthermore, should the same institutions that furthered Eurocentrism now be allowed to do an about-face and be the sole saviors as well? Should they benefit, financially and culturally, from undoing the problems they created in the first place? In Bangla we would say: *agartao khay, gorartao khay* (They eat from both the treetop and its' roots). The location of these contestations need to be radically shifted. Expecting the Global South to always "bring" its narratives into the Western proscenium places reparative labor on one side, and beneficiary

flows on another. The imperative becomes for "we" to know equally our stories and yours—a project of twice the work. What is needed is much more entanglement between the two, not only in listening to these stories, but also in their making: not as duty, but as pleasure— the way things could be.

boobook

Documentary:
Social Realism's
Quest for
Reality

boobook

Development Discourse: Photography's New Trend

The changes that came to photography in the 1990s involved several organisations (MAP, Beg Art, BPS), but Drik played the leading role. To understand the sea change in Bangladesh photography in the 1980s and '90s, Drik is better understood as a metaphor, rather than only an organization—because its influence was strong enough that people took images in the "Drik style" even without belonging to that space.

The first major change in this period was the attachment of photography to development discourse. And that conjoining was not as decoration, but rather as primary element of the discourse itself. If we look at some classic developmentalist texts of the 1970s, things come sharply into focus. Two important books on Bangladesh at that time were *Needless Hunger* (Hartmann & Boyce, 1979) and *A Quiet Violence* (Hartmann, 1983). Both books employ precise and detailed prose to sketch out the contours of rural poverty. And at the end is, naturally, a solution. Or if not a solution, then the assumption that an NGO will come and map out the path forward. However, aside from the cover, these books have no images. In other words, this sector did not seem to think, at that time, that an image may be equal to a thousand words, or that images may speak at all.

In subsequent years, as photographs became more valued, alongside prose, the language of social reality photographs, and the outlets for publishing such work, began to transform. Before going into this, let us pause for a moment to consider the work of Bangladesh Photographic Society (BPS). When BPS was working at full force in the 1980s, some may consider that a 'golden age' for Bangladeshi photography. But why such longing for a time of difficulty? At that time, photographers struggled to make a living, there was a deficit of equipment and facilities, and publication outlets were limited. In spite of this, the nostalgia and love for this period may be due to a few factors: a) At that time, there was almost a 'let thousand flowers bloom' ethos in the heterogeneity of work; b) The West had not yet begun looking at the Global South, so the whole 'who are these images for' anxiety was absent.
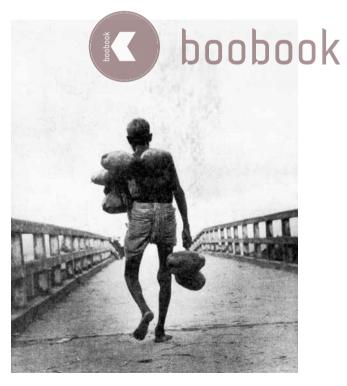
At this time, pioneering photographer Manzoor Alam Beg encouraged Shahidul Alam to become

involved with BPS. Subsequently, Alam brought much more direct politics into social realism. Also in BPS were Debabrata Choudhury, Mohammad Ali Salim, Hasan Saifuddin Chandan, Khalid Mahmud Mithu, and others. At this time, the prevailing tendency was salon and pictorial photography. Composition, light, aesthetics, and form would take priority over the content of the image. One advisor to BPS even said, with naive optimism, "Photography should not only draw attention to oppression and suffering, it should also inspire the wealthy and powerful of this city to do something about it."[1] Of course the idea that only the powerful could "do something" was a form of anti-politics. A different idea came through during the launch of the Anwar Hossain edited *Bangladesh Life and Culture* (1986) anthology. At that time, DFP (Department of Films & Publications) gave tremendous pressure to include an image of General Ershad (head of the ruling military regime) touring the flood-hit area of Urir Char. Hossain refused to accept this intervention and DFP retaliated by printing very few copies (the book is scarce today for this reason). Although this book covered many of the standard subjects of social realism (praying man, ferrywala, church, tea shop, farmer), the lack of captions and information made the collection incomplete. Throughout the 1980s, social documentary stayed in this limbo of lack of supplementary information. All this changed when Shahidul Alam left BPS and founded Drik Photo Library.

Drik's achievements have been enumerated in detail elsewhere[2], so I won't repeat them here. Suffice it to say that Drik simultaneously turned photography into a profession, created an overseas market for publishing these images, emphasized the importance of copyright, and enacted the category of 'award-winning photographer.' Besides,

[1] Brigadier (retd) Atik Ur Rahman, "Development of Photography in Bangladesh," *Bangladesh Observer*, November 2, 1982.

[2] See, for example, Naeem Mohaiemen interview with Shahidul Alam in *Samar* magazine (1998) and *Bidoun* (2008, reprinted in this anthology).

an important change to form came through the long-form photo story rather than the single shot. Crucially, Drik established social realism as the peak of the photography field. In particular, images of marginalized populations became a dominant paradigm in Bangladeshi photography.

In the 1980s, social realism began an extended journey. The collapse of the Ershad regime released media organizations from military censorship. No accurate reports or images could be published between 1982 and 1990 on the misdeeds of the Ershad junta. After the fall, many photographers became enthusiastic to finally tell those, and similar, suppressed stories. In sharp contrast with the previous decades of romantic images of villages came a strand of work on urban subaltern populations.

Global networks meant that the British Council began bringing over photographers such as Steve Conlan and Peter Fryer, which impacted local photography. Much of this work centered around Drik, but also spread to MAP and other organisations. Important projects in this period were Hasan Saifuddin Chandan's 'The People of Kamlapur Railway Station' (floating subaltern population), Shahidul Alam's 'Struggle for Democracy' (the anti-Ershad movement), Shehzad Noorani's 'Daughters of the Night' (sex workers), Shafiqul Alam Kiron's 'Acid Victim' (violence survivors), Abir Abdullah's 'War Veteran' (handicapped veterans), etc. In Alam's work in particular, ironic contrasts between parallel lives were prominent—lavish hotel weddings, luxury shopping at Aarong, and the subtle apartheid of television viewing with household staff came into the frame.

By now, there was a distinct grammar in social documentary work. The images were often dense and stark black and white (color was often the exception). Your eyes might even "hurt" from the sharp focused object at center point. There was often a dramatic hard contrast, which became more dominant in the time of Photoshop. (An Indian friend once asked, "How are your Bangladesh skies so starkly gorgeous?", to which I replied, "Dodge Burn.") Leaving aside technical motifs, certain themes appeared: serialized story, central character, spending long periods with the subject, etc. One work that diverged from these tendencies was G.M.B. Akash's work on transgender communities, where there was both a riotous excess of color (possibly showing the influence of Mary Ellen Mark's notorious photobook on Bombay sex workers, *Falkland Road* (1981)) and an almost insolent wide angle lense. The question is whether the social realism mainstream of that time was able to digest that rebellion.
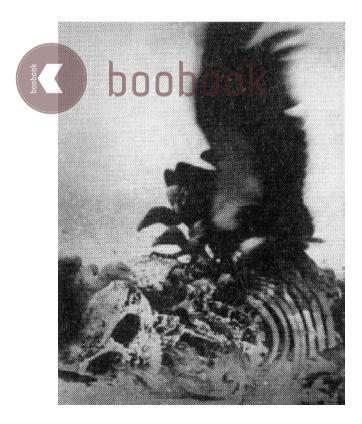
Moving from the supply side (Bangladesh), let us look at the demand side of the equation. Photography had now become a central part of development networks and discourse. Western agencies wanted a few concepts: a) *Situation is terrible, please do something*; b) *Here you can see results of our programs*; c) *Oh, how cruel is this planet!*

The third tendency started, of course, a long time ago. Even in the December 1950 issue of *Popular Photography* magazine (price: fifty cents!)—on page 110 was Asad K. Syed's photograph. A few beggars sleeping on the street; one is screaming with her eyes covered while a child suckles on her dried breasts. The photographer's caption? What else could it be after all… 'The Problem'! Yes, we have seen these same images in Shamsul Islam Al-Majhi's work as well. As in 1950, so in 1975, so in…?

Besides this whole 'nobility in poverty' trope, there were other drivers of demand as well. That is, the Northern nations' own cultural crisis, from which they sought escape through "color" and "diversity"— which, supposedly, only the Global South could provide. White liberal guilt was a major factor here, for which they looked toward us for "simple life" and "ancient knowledge." Sometimes I humorously compare this to how the Beatles imploded under the pressure of success, and promptly came to India to learn the sitar. *Take back this city, give us the halcyon life.* All this may seem excess sarcasm, but the facts on the ground are there. Social realism is a powerful strand of image making in Bangladesh, and it gives a tremendous body blow to many of the established sources of power. At the same time, its rise to dominance is interlinked with some very particular demands and trajectories in the West. This includes development discourse, NGO (non government organisation) activities, award and festival circuit,

a Bengali photographer. Then it gets printed in that same *New York Times*. Have we broken the paradigm, or just replaced a westerner with ourselves? And if it is a Bengali, taking that image and marketing it abroad, why is our discourse still in that wounded domain? Why do we not ask what role we play in the politics of "victim" imagery? If we are going to discuss economic inequality, let us also talk about the premium economic circuit created in Dhaka by the camera equipment (even as the primary buyers of images are foreign organizations, and local-international joint ventures).

It is also time to raise questions about the "reality creation" mechanism of current social documentaries.

That iconic photograph of the 1971 war (three fighters, each with a different weapon) now looks clearly staged, far away from the battlefield. Or if you look at that war image of vultures on top of skeletons, you can now see that it is a composite of two photographs. In a similar fashion, a lot of current social realism images may be creating illusions and mirages. Not with staged poses (such crude manipulations are less common now), but rather the illusion is in presentation. We need to consider where the image is being displayed, which NGO is instrumentalizing the work (we sometimes seem to be in the grips of an endless victim rehabilitation fundraiser), what prose is deployed in the caption, and how the photographer presents themselves (hero, survivor, or savior).

Many of the current generation of imagemakers grew up in Dhaka or another city. A portion now come from middle class homes (especially as photography transforms into a respected, profitable, and award-winning professional track). And yet many of them still focus their camera on various inequities in the villages, the collapse of the riverine system, and other topics that match with funding categories. Certainly, in the last five years, "climate change" has emerged as a major source of commissioning of new work. In that canvas, we are always simultaneously "victim," "martyr," and worthy of "saving" (the photographers' own intent often becomes irrelevant in this equation).

Often a source of funding gives the false hope of rapid transformation, while our own internal foundation remains weak and unresolved. For example, if you look at the wave of photo features on queer love, you may think our society has advanced dramatically in attitudes and thinking. But if you scan the aggressive comments and trolling underneath these photographs on social media, you realize the society is still as constricted and suffocating as ever.