Dr. Shahidul Alam — 2018 TIME Person of the Year, world-renowned photojournalist, human rights activist, and Bangladeshi visionary — was in Berkeley last weekend to give the UC Berkeley Chowdhury Center for Bangladesh Studies Inaugural Lecture. His Berkeley stop was a week into his nearly month-long travels of lectures at universities like Columbia and the New School, exhibition openings at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York and the V&A in London, interviews with the New York Times, and meetings with curators at the NY Museum of Modern Art. He will be back in Dhaka just in time for an event to commemorate one year since his release...
from prison — when he was jailed for speaking out about the police violence toward youth protesters during mass student-led protests.

I was in Bangladesh last year while these protests took place — students around the country mass organized and shut down the streets of their cities to demand stronger road safety regulation. Even more impressive was the fact that the students themselves were directing Dhaka traffic for a few days — Dhaka traffic being one of the most haphazard systems in the world. But the more sinister side of this was the police brutality that took place against the protesters, many ranging from young teens to university students. The violence got worse when the university student wing of the political party in power began to infiltrate the protests and stir up fights. The government shut the Internet down for a couple of days to quell the spread of information. Protest organizers and those speaking out about the government’s inaction began to disappear from their homes.

My office was on lockdown during one of these evenings because some young men with bats had gotten into the building and were going from office to office to find someone they had heard was an organizer. Amidst all of this, I remember seeing the Facebook Live videos of Shahidul Alam, as he recorded himself going into the middle of these protests — wearing a bicycle helmet, panjabi, his signature fanny pack with camera lenses, and earbuds. He was broadcasting what was happening on the ground in Dhaka to the world, when no one else was, as he is wont to do. It felt absolutely vital. Not long after that, Alam was forcibly taken from his home and charged under Section 57 of Bangladesh’s Information Communications Technology Act, a broad law against electronic communication that “tends to deprave or corrupt” the image of the state. Media coverage of his time in prison, the Catch-22 like legal proceedings around his case, and the global outpouring of support brought the autocratic dealings of the current government into focus.

I had the opportunity to speak with Alam while he was in Berkeley last week. What follows is a portion of our conversation on the representation of Bangladesh on the global stage, the role that we must play in combating social inequality, and what gives him hope about the future of the country.
In your work, you’ve touched on the importance of shaping the narrative of your country as someone who is actually from there. Did you ever think about how to change the predominantly western narrative of Bangladesh on the global stage, or do you focus more on producing good work on your own terms?

What I try to do in my stories is to humanize people. Essentially a large part of the problem for me is that the characters are dehumanized. They are made into prototypes and almost stuck together as modules or Lego pieces. There are wonderful and rich human stories in all these situations, and that’s what draws me to the stories and to the individuals. And I think that is also what people can relate to. That is what creates empathy and understanding. So often, things about my story are small little details that personify the story in some way, that bring it to life in a different way. Of course, you look at the facts, you look at the data, you put it together in some sort of a structure. But it always needs to be woven in with those human fabrics. And that’s what I try to do in my work — through my photography, through my words. To get the essence of the character out if I can.

Would you say the objective is more about creating these human stories — it’s not necessarily about changing any existing narrative?
Well, the thing is, the human stories are what the story is. And what’s out there may or may not fit. I think, provided you create work which gives dignity to people, where you have a situation of mutual respect, I think people are intelligent. They can find out for themselves, they become curious, they take time, they do their own homework. But those cords are not there often, the dots are often not connected, and that is what I see as my role. At the end of the day, the people themselves are their best ambassadors.

That is so true, I feel like people don’t talk about that enough — the idea of trusting your audience.

And it goes the other way too. I think politicians consider us to be stupid. I mean, they make all these statements, assuming we will swallow them without realizing that we are independent, intelligent people. They are often surrounded by sycophants who will respond to their rhetoric in a manner, and I think over time they lose that connection and they forget that there are real people out there. If you are genuine with real people, they will respond.

Rejoicing at Ershad’s Fall, Mirpur Road, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1990 by Shahidul Alam.
You mentioned that past governments in Bangladesh have been as democratic as we are seeing now — that in addition to being imprisoned last year under the current government, you’ve been stabbed multiple times and reprimanded in various ways for speaking out under previous leadership. Do you believe that the country is shifting toward authoritarianism and more extremist behaviors, or is this par for the course?

It is complicated, but firstly I don’t think it is a cycle because this has been forever on the rise. The level of corruption, the level of oppression, has gradually been on the rise and I don’t think we’ve had a situation as bad as today ever before. The fact that there is this rise of Wahhabism, not necessarily extremism, I think also has to do with the fact that we haven’t really created alternatives. People need to believe, people need something to trust, people want to hope. And the politicians have not given them that. So, religion provides a balm in the absence of other positive vibes. And that I think is the danger. I think, had we provided the basic services, had people had job security, had they been safe in their lives, had they been respected, had they been treated as human beings, I don’t think these other things could have thrived in the same way. They’re doing it in the absence of these very real parameters.

I was in Swat in Pakistan during the time when it was occupied by the Taliban, and I was curious and wanted to know — because Swat has always been a very progressive place — why it had come under Taliban control. I was fascinated by the fact that, of course the Taliban was religious, but it wasn’t religion that they were peddling. They were saying, “Your judiciary doesn’t work, your bureaucracy doesn’t work, your infrastructure doesn’t work. We will make your system work.” And, as far as the average person was concerned, that’s what they’re interested in. These are poor people, with their backs against the wall, in a very unequal situation where none of these systems serve them. They only serve the rich. So here was someone who was saying, “We will make the system serve you and provide what you need.” And they were happy with that. That for me is a danger because, in the absence of those services, these other options will come in. And I think we have created an environment, which while it is not extremist today, is fertile ground for extremism to grow.

What do you think is the way to combat this trend?
Well firstly, I think it is a question of all of us — you, and I, and everyone — to recognize that it is our problem. It’s not something that someone else can solve.

**Do you mean “our” as in Bangladeshis?**

Yes, Bangladeshis everywhere. It is a global problem too, but we can’t solve everyone’s problems. But we can try and solve at least our own. And I do believe that people like you and me, who are very privileged people, who have access, who have the means, and who are heard, we must play a far more active role in ensuring that my country does not get hijacked. The poor are doing as much as they possibly can. They are the ones who are taking the most risks. But we’ve let them be and they’ve felt the brunt of it. In my country, farmers have wanted water, they’ve wanted seeds — these are the essential things for farmers. And repeatedly, governments have opened fire on them, killing them. Garment workers have wanted minimum wages. These are not unreasonable claims by any means. Yet, our governments have turned their forces against these people, and we have not stood by their side at these crucial moments. I think it is time that we did so.
You have a photograph that speaks to this inequality in Bangladeshi society, where there is a massive 1000-person, opulent wedding taking place in Dhaka at the same time as the Bangladesh floods of 1988 [ed. In a climate-vulnerable, flood-prone nation, the 1988 floods are the most catastrophic in Bangladesh’s history]. How do we, as a society, reckon with these deep inequalities?

I think we need to take stock because future generations will be asking us, “How did you let it happen? It happened on your watch. You allowed it to happen.” And I think we will be taken into account. I mean, we think of the material gains that we have done, we send our kids to Ivy League schools, we cater for them in all sorts of ways. We forget that at the end of the day, that moral responsibility is also what we need to share. And I’ve used the word before, we’ve abdicated. If Bangladesh is allowed to go the way it is going, it is headed for ruin. And we will be ultimately responsible for having allowed it to decay.

It is a constant question of reminding us. I mean, that is why I took the trouble to come here and talk to you. I think I need to reach out to you, as much as you need to listen to me. And I feel it as part of my task to ensure that you, and people around you, that all of us rally around, and that at the end of the day it is our country. It’s no use blaming it on politicians and whoever else, for it being what it is. Fixing it isn’t someone else’s job. And for me, what was very impressive was that the kids were actually managing the streets [during the 2018 road protests]. So, you’ve got all of these kids who are able to efficiently run a system and machinery. They pointed out that this can be done. But it requires someone to make that effort.
What are some tangible ways in which you think people in different roles can play this part?

I think the toughest and the most important work is being done by people on the ground. Grassroots people who are very committed, who’ve been doing it for a very long time. I think sitting out here or far away, you will not have direct access to these people, but you can try and reach out to them. I mean the role that I play, and that some of my contemporaries play, is that we form the bridge. We’re able to be here and meet you, but we’re also on the ground with them. And whether it be through us or direct contacts that you have, I think it is a question of supporting the people on the ground. They’re the ones who are most vulnerable, they’re the ones who need the help most. And it can be help in many ways. Sure it can be material help, but it can also be connecting them, protecting them, encouraging them, spreading the word. There are many, many ways in which we can play a role. But we do have to play that role. If our lives are just business as usual, and then we moan every now and then about what’s happening in Bangladesh, then that’s not good enough.

I suppose you see this as more of a bottom-up approach?

I think it needs to work two ways. The problem is, the people on the ground do not have access to many of the things that the rest of us have access to. And because we have that access, we need to make more of an effort to ensure that the resources that we can tap into are made available for the people who can use it best.

You’ve also mentioned that there are a lot of things that we can be proud of about Bangladesh. Can you speak a little bit more about this?

Firstly, the things that happened, like the cyclones, the floods — and we just had [Cyclone] Bulbul happening last night. For me, the real story is the tenacity and the
resistance of the people that under such circumstances keep on fighting, get on with their lives, and play their role as citizens. Those are the aspects that need to be talked about. But there are also many, many Bangladeshis doing fine work. I think the fact that the Chowdhury Center is doing what it is, is important. There are Bangladeshis here trying to encourage critical thinking, debate, and discussions around important issues of relevance to Bangladesh.

I have also heard of several people here of Bangladeshi origin who are doing very fine work, who are very important people, who are examples to society. Yet, these are not stories we talk about. I am actually particularly interested right now on doing a feature on Bangladeshis who have played such a role. And I would like to find them, to meet them, to talk about them, to tell their stories. Since coming here, I’ve actually made a conscious decision that I will reach out and try and find some of these people and maybe come back again and spend some time. Those are stories about my country that also need to be told and no one is telling them.


Have you always had this streak of activism and social advocacy, despite your PhD in organic chemistry?
Social justice has always been very important for me. Growing up, as I did, my parents played a very important role. My mother was a very prominent educationist. And they’ve been great examples. But, 1971 [ed. the year of Bangladesh’s liberation war] was a huge influence on me. And it was a question of combating injustice at a national level and at a personal level. It was while I was doing my PhD that I got involved with the Socialist Workers’ Party in London. And that’s when I began to see how they were using images as part of their campaign very productively. And that made me realize the power of the medium. I was also seduced by the beauty of the medium. As an art form, it fascinated me. But what it could do, in terms of transforming people’s lives, was to me very special.

I was always going to go back home, so there was no question of that, but that’s what made me think, does Bangladesh need another research chemist? With this tool, I felt like I could contribute in a far more meaningful way. I didn’t know if I could make a living out of it, but I was going to give it a try. And in the beginning, it wasn’t easy because no one would hire me as a photojournalist. But I had technical skills. I was doing advertising, corporate fashion photography. And doing what I wanted to do on the side, over time that has become my work, and I stopped doing the commercial work for a long time.

Did you have direct role models when you were getting involved in social activism in Bangladesh?

Yes, but my role models were not big names. They were ordinary people. There was a guy who was a rag collector. Walking home from the office, it was about eight minutes’ walk. I would invariably come across him with his, presumably, son, and a little lantern. He would go around the streets collecting scraps, and that’s how he made a living. This was a person who lived a very difficult life, but he was living an honest life, contributing. And there are so many people like that. And they are my inspiration.

You’ve mentioned the youth and grassroots political movements — what else gives you hope about the future of Bangladesh?

I think the strength, resilience, and generosity of ordinary people. There is a story I have. In 1991, after the cyclone, I went to Kutubdia. And the people there offered me coconuts, and water was the most scarce thing at that time. And I said, “I’ve come from this fancy hotel, I’m here, I’m going to talk to you, and then go back to that hotel. You are
the ones that need this.” Then this man said, “But we have nothing else to give. You can’t say no.” And that’s the immense generosity that ordinary people have.

Then later on, I came across this little girl, Sofia. She had lost every member of her family, literally was the last living member. I was very worried about what would happen to this little girl. But soon, she got taken up by another family that was just as destitute, but found this little girl and made a home for her. And that is the poor in Bangladesh, who have done this.

We talk about the big NGOs, the government, the donor agencies, and what they’ve done. But we forget that the greatest social structure that we have is the rural poor who have supported one another at all times. Whenever something like this happens, someone else is there. And they don’t exist in our data or in our statistics, but they, I think, are the mainstay of my land.

Related to what you’re saying about the generosity of Bangladeshi people — this makes me think of the Rohingya issue. A lot of how the refugee crisis is covered in Bangladeshi media suggests that the Rohingya must go back to Myanmar. How do
you make sense of this predominant Bangladeshi narrative of the Rohingya, given how much pride there is in Bangladeshi generosity?

I think the solution for them is to go back to their homes — not to be sent back. “Sent back” suggests that this is something we’ve done against their will. We [Bangladeshis] were refugees in India [in 1971]. We could come back when there was peace, when the Pakistani military had gone. Before that, there was no question of us coming back. That military junta [in Myanmar] is still there, [the Rohingya] are still not citizens of the land, they still don’t have basic rights, they are still being persecuted. The solution is in creating an environment where they can come back home. Of course they want to go back home. We don’t need to push them back. They will want to go back. But our job is to ensure that the environment exists for them to be able to go back. So I think the emphasis is being placed on the wrong end. It’s not a push, it has to be a pull.

And I think we need to ask very hard questions of the international community. Something of this sort, had it happened to a non-Muslim community — I’m being very blunt — would probably have created an uproar. Yes there are people saying things, but at the end of the day, people are being very polite. Because they want to continue to do business with Myanmar, they don’t want to rock the boat. And of course, the two big nations near us, India and China, are still very pal-y with Myanmar, and they will not say anything to upset Myanmar. While that’s the case, we will not do very much either. So, I think it’s about time we call a spade a spade. It’s genocide in Myanmar. And if there is genocide, then the world needs to act.

It is striking to me that given Bangladesh’s history, with Bangladeshis themselves being displaced political refugees in the 1970s, that there is an “other-ing” narrative in Bangladesh, not just with the Rohingya, but with indigenous populations as well. What do you think is the way forward here, in possibly reconstructing this narrative?

Many other people have to play a role. I think the leadership has to be there, which has looked at the Rohingyas as a source of material benefit. I mean, you get foreign aid, you get other things. And I’m sure had that not been the case, the Rohingyas would not have been quite so welcome. But I think it is also the job of artists and writers and thinkers of my land to get these ideas across, to be talking about them in those terms. I mean, mindsets do not happen by themselves. There have to be thought leaders to make us see
the errors of our ways. And that has not happened. I don’t see artists or writers or poets taking on this challenge. And I think, in the same way that others have abdicated — as well as the media — I think we have really been very irresponsible.

But at the end of the day, the real story is that despite all the things that have been happening, Bangladesh is still doing well, Bangladesh still has huge possibilities. And I think it is a nation that is obviously on the rise. All we need to do is ensure that it is not held back. It has wings and it will fly. We just need to ensure that it’s not caged.