

Shahidul Alam's *DESH*

As I pen these thoughts, renowned photographer and human rights activist Shahidul Alam has spent more than six weeks in remand and jail in Dhaka, has repeatedly been refused bail, and – on his first appearance in court in mid-August – had visibly been subject to assault while in custody.

For most people in Bangladesh, and those involved in the defence of Freedom of Expression around the world, Shahidul Alam needs no introduction, but in journalist Salil Tripathi's words: "Alam is a witness. His book is called *My Journey As A Witness*. He has spent his life documenting Bangladesh's human drama. He has educated hundreds of photographers at his school, Pathshala. His multimedia organization Drik runs an art gallery and maintains a photographic archive of the liberation war. He has persistently spoken out for the vulnerable and the dispossessed, including the Chakmas and the stateless Rohingyas. This October, in New York, he will receive the prestigious Lucie Award for his humanitarian photography."¹

Shahidul Alam has been imprisoned by the very State that proffered him its highest artistic award, the Shilpakala Padak in 2015, under Section 57 of Bangladesh's Information and Communication Technology Act, ostensibly for a Facebook post criticising the government crackdown on students and citizens protesting inaction over increasing road safety lapses. That was all it took.

A moment like this – when we celebrate the culmination of a 3-year tour of *Chotto Desh*, the love and admiration its makers and cast have received from audiences around the world – is also a moment to speak about Shahidul Alam, to cherish his work and to call for his release, repeatedly, until we are heard. A moment, also, to thank him for tales that mosaicked to form *DESH*, and, subsequently, *Chotto Desh*.

For two of the central strands of these two shows came directly from Shahidul Alam. That of Juhi, the cheeky, intrepid teenager from the Chittagong Hill Tribes who moonlights as a software trouble-shooter, and solves the iCal problems of the Akram-character. Juhi, whose interactions with Akram form the backbone of *DESH* and *Chotto Desh*, the connective thread between past and present, between reality and fantasy. The name – like her encounter with Akram – was invented, but Juhi is very real: an anonymous, but inspiring teen whose story was chronicled, and shared with us, by Shahidul Alam on a bright, wintry afternoon in Dhaka. He also told us of the martyred Noor Hussain and showed us that last image – fist raised, the words *Free Democracy* painted in Bangla on his back – which took on another avatar as the blazon of *DESH*.

Yes, for us, it is a time for celebration, for congratulation, but also for remembrance. As we toast *Chotto Desh*, we also remember and thank the Bangladeshis who made *DESH* the powerful, poignant, real chronicle it is: the many, many people whose families and friends shared their stories with great generosity and allowed us to take and use them, sometimes remould them into a different context.

People who trusted that we would always be true to the complexity of those narratives, not reduce them into clichés; that we would highlight the spirit of resilience that marked Bangladesh for so long, that allowed it to regain democracy time after time. Today, while the world fights increasing dangers of extremism and autocracy, it is vital to honour these people. To honour them, and to call for their safety, their freedom. For chroniclers of truth like Shahidul Alam are our greatest wealth.

Karthika Nair

¹ Live Mint, Wednesday, August 8, 2018